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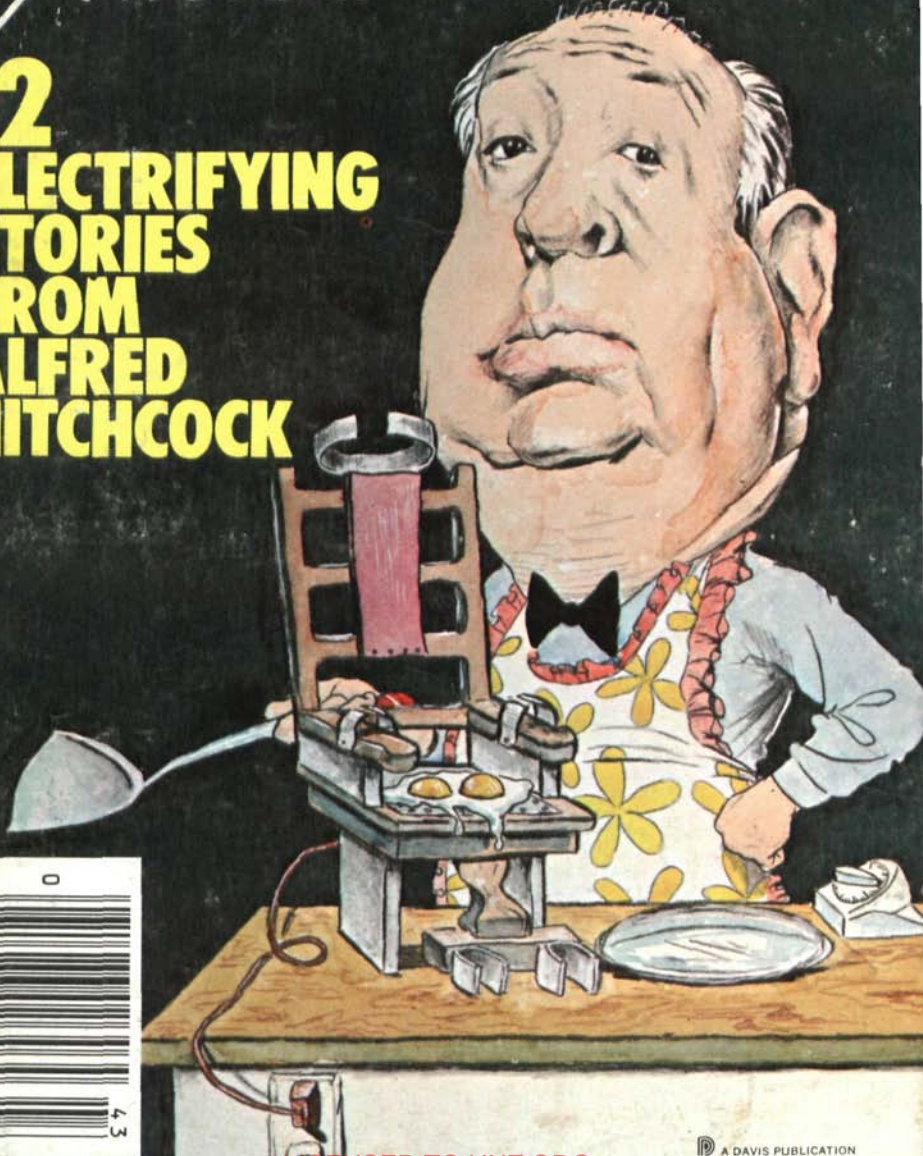
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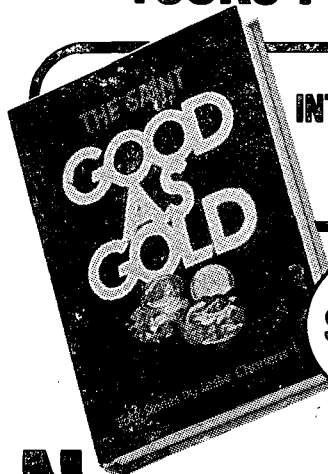
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October 27, 1980



Dear Reader:

The dozen stories we present in this month's issue are a pack of lies, falsehoods, and deceptions.

In them you will read about a couple who lead a double life, a firm that deals in obfuscation, an actor who's not as wholesome as he seems, and the richest man in a small Maine town, who makes his living in a very mysterious way.

You'll meet a lawyer who could rightfully be called a liar and follow the untangling of a web of deception at a wedding. Historical humbug, a prevaricating lady, and a strange, creepy kidnapper are featured as well.

And if you still insist on believing something you read in this issue, we invite you to turn to the story by Edward D. Hoch. Like all the tales that come before it, it's pure fiction.

Good reading.

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ALFRED

HITCHCOCK'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE

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Hurst Lodge was the first house to be burglarized . . .

THE EXTRA MAN



"And Cecil, I suppose?" Pamela Stevenson asked, adding one more name to the list without waiting for her husband's assent. "It's a bore, I know, having to invite him yet again—but it can't be helped."

"Why can't it be helped?" Dick asked. "Why do we have to invite him again if it's a bore?"

"Because without him we should be seven women and four men, which would be more boring still."

"How about dropping one of the surplus women?"

"You mean asking one of the husbands to leave his wife at home?" Pamela inquired politely. "Perhaps that would do for the vicar. We could try selling him the idea as an act of Christian charity."

"Spare me the sarcasm, old girl! I mean, I may not be much good at the social niceties, but I *can* count and you *did* say seven."

"I know, but we simply can't leave out the Jepson sisters again. We've been to them twice in the last three months. I realize they can afford it—far better than we can, as it happens—but that's not the point. Anne looks at me quite oddly nowadays and says, 'Haven't seen you for ages!' It's beginning to get embarrassing."

"Yes, all right, but there were only two of them at last count. You must have one loner on your list."

"Oh, yes, so I have!" Pamela agreed. "Your sister Ruth, who's coming all the way from Yorkshire to spend her annual visit here next week and for whose benefit I am trying to arrange a small party of congenial old friends. Now, how shall we dispose of her, I wonder?"

The Stevensons had reached a point in their lives when some such altercation as this formed an almost inevitable prelude to all their entertaining. So many of their friends were now retired people like Dick himself, with many of them widowed. And there was no escaping the fact that in that category the women outnumbered the men by approximately two to one, with the gap growing wider every year.

Admittedly, there were one or two unmarried men, living singly or in pairs, in that much-sought-after neighborhood around the village of Swains, so rural and unspoiled, yet so accessible to London. Most of these were weekenders, taking a break from the hurly-burly of Fulham antique shops or the interior-decorating trade, and they had a tendency toward flamboyant, new-looking shirts and ties and to speaking in high-pitched, over-emphatic voices. Somewhat to Pamela's regret, Dick, whose career had taken him to the highest pinnacle of the Royal Air Force, maintained that he was sorry, but one had to draw the line somewhere, even in this day and age, and he flatly refused to sit in the same room with them.

When he first moved into Hurst Lodge some two years previously, Cecil Bartlett had given rise to similar misgivings among the ruling set. In the first place, he had brought his widowed, semi-invalid mother with

him, which was often a bad sign, but he had displayed no undue, unwholesome dependence on her and, indeed, had been at pains to make it clear that the arrangement was based on purely practical grounds. Their social lives were kept in separate compartments and, furthermore, his mother was not up to dining out these days, preferring to spend her evenings with supper on a tray, watching television.

Better still, he had accounted for his comparative youth in the retirement field by explaining that, having made his modest pile, he had chosen to leave the rat race while still active enough to enjoy country life to the full. Best of all, he did not attempt to alter the unpretentious, dignified facade of Hurst Lodge by installing picture windows or spurious leaded panes, he invariably appeared in the daytime wearing well worn tweeds, and he was frequently seen clumping around the village in muddy old gumboots with two terriers on a lead. In no time at all he had become the most popular and reliable extra man at all the best social functions.

As the weeks rolled into months and the months into a year, only one small fly had been uncovered beneath the surface of this ointment and only a few dissident voices raised to point it out. It consisted of the fact that, no matter how often Cecil might be invited out, the favor was never returned. Not one of his hosts had ever been inside Hurst Lodge at his invitation. His mother occasionally invited a few women to morning coffee or afternoon tea in her own little back sitting room, but that was the extent of the hospitality on offer.

The loudest and most articulate among the dissident voices belonged to Miss Anne Jepson. In her forthright fashion, she had expressed the general, though generally silent, dissatisfaction.

"Let's face it—if you reckon that he dines out twice a week, which is probably a conservative estimate, he not only eats his way through one hundred free dinners per annum, but he also chinks up an average of two hundred gin-and-tonics, thirty bottles of wine, and several pints of Scotch and brandy. And all for the pleasure of his company!"

"Hold on a minute, could you?" Cecil asked, going through the customary routine when Pamela telephoned. "Tuesday the eighth sounds fine to me, but I'd better check in the little book to be on the safe side. Ah! I see I've promised to look in on the Harcourt-Brownes for a drink that evening. I suppose I can't very well dash in and dash out again. Would eight o'clock be too late for you?"

"No, eight o'clock would be splendid."

"Oh, perfect! Thank you so much. I look forward to it immensely. Your parties are always such fun."

"We have so many nice friends," Pamela said mechanically.

On the morning of Ruth's arrival Pamela's heart sank when she answered the telephone and heard Cecil's voice, but was quickly restored to its normal position when he said merrily: "No, no, I'm not ringing to put you off, wouldn't dream of it," and rose to greater heights still as the conversation proceeded.

"The fact is, Pamela, I wanted to beg a small favor. A very old friend of mine has taken a whim to descend on us for a few days. Recently bereaved too, which made it hard to refuse, and the thing is, knowing what a generous soul you are, I was wondering—would it be a great imposition?"

"But of course not," Pamela broke in. "We should be delighted to see your friend as well," thinking to herself as she spoke that six men and seven women would be a great improvement, though forgetting that it also made a total of thirteen.

"Oh, that is kind of you! We shall be a tiny bit late, I'm afraid. As I believe I mentioned, we've promised to look in on the Harcourt-Brownes on the way."

"Yes, that's quite all right. We'll expect you about eight, but no wild hurry. We shan't be dining before half past. Oh, and by the way, Cecil, I'd better know, hadn't I? What's your friend's name?"

"Fanshawe," he replied. "Dorothy Fanshawe. See you on Tuesday as ever is, then! Bye-bye for now."

Despite all the odds against it, the party was a great success. The odds against, starting with the realization that it would now consist of five men and eight women, had mounted steadily during the intervening forty-eight hours. The rot set in when Ruth announced within minutes of her arrival that she was on a strict diet which absolutely forbade the minutest intake of butter, cream, or sugar, thereby reducing the entire menu to a shambles.

What sounded like the last knell had tolled when, on the day itself, Mary Jepson had telephoned to request that all Stevenson dogs and cats be banished to the nether regions of the house during her presence there.

It appeared that some fool of a doctor—the latest in a long line to be consulted in the matter of Mary's chronic asthma—had given it as his firm opinion that she had a particular allergy to these creatures. This absurd decree utterly destroyed Dick's good humor, not to mention that of the three animals concerned.

Nevertheless, and thanks largely to the charm and vivacity of Dorothy Fanshawe, all went as merry as a marriage bell. Even Ruth was generous with her compliments.

"Delightful evening, my dears, and thank you both so much," she said during the ritual post-mortem, which took place mainly on the staircase and the upstairs landing as they all slowly retired to their rooms. "Even your friend Cecil was quite sparkling for once. I didn't like to say anything, knowing how attached you both are to him, but I must confess that my heart did rather sink when you told me he was coming. He can be—well—a little ponderous, if you know what I mean."

"Oh, so well," Pamela agreed with a sad smile. "But you know how it is. Like so many truly good and kind people, he's not exactly the soul of wit. But such a dear, all the same, and one can't help admiring the way he copes with that old mother."

"Oh, absolutely—and really I should be the last to criticize. I have one or two old lame-duck bachelors permanently on my own conscience, as you know so well. But Dorothy's a marvel, isn't she? I laughed till the tears ran down my face when she was telling us about that disastrous trip on the Norfolk Broads she and her husband made. And she was fascinated to hear that I lived at Bretherington. She knows dozens of people round there and she has a friend who has just started a marvelous antique shop in Harrogate. She's promised to take me there so that we can have a lovely browse. No obligation to buy, I need hardly say."

"Oh, really? When?"

"When she comes up to stay with me. In the autumn, if things go according to plan. Didn't you hear all that? Well, good night, both of you, and thank you again. Quite one of your best evenings!"

Three weeks later Cecil took his mother to spend a weekend in Devonshire.

"I can't understand it," Anne Jepson complained to Pamela when they met in the village. "I was always under the impression that she was practically bedridden."

"Oh, well, I suppose she can manage a car journey once in a while."

"Of getting on for two hundred miles, when she's not even strong enough to go out to tea? If you ask me, he's been conning us."

"My dear Anne, whatever do you mean?"

"Playing on our sympathy. Making out that his poor old mum is so helpless he has to wear himself to the bone looking after her and the house as well, so that we all keep plying him with hot dinners while expecting nothing in return."

"Speak for yourself," Pamela said with some asperity, "because, personally, I *do* expect something in return and, on the whole, in my view, he pulls his weight. He may not be the most electrifying man on earth, but he gets on well with almost everyone. I regard him as quite an acquisition in our somewhat limited circle, and I should certainly miss him if he were to leave us now."

"Not much danger of that, in my opinion. He knows a good wicket when he's on one, I'll say that for him."

"Oh, Anne, you're much too hard on him," Pamela said, with her most charitable smile.

Nevertheless, she felt a triffly uneasy. Anne might have a crude way of expressing herself, but she also had a nasty habit of being right.

On the very day after the Bartletts' departure to Devonshire, their house was broken into and stripped of many of its contents. Only smaller items were removed, the largest being an eighteenth-century knee-hole desk from Mrs. Bartlett's sitting room, but they also happened to be among the most valuable of their possessions and included, as well, a pearl necklace, a diamond and amethyst brooch, an original Victorian water color, and an authentic carriage clock.

This selectiveness on the part of the thieves was one of the features which convinced Detective Sergeant Fiske, who was in charge of the case, that it was a carefully planned operation, skillfully carried out by experts in the business, at least one of whom had previous, possibly legitimate, access to the house, or was in the confidence of someone who knew it intimately.

A factor which reinforced this belief was the timing. Not only did it coincide with one of the very rare occasions when the premises had been left unoccupied, but it also took place during one of the equally rare absences from home of its nearest neighbors.

Hurst Lodge was the second of two houses in a lane which had a notice at its entrance bearing the warning "No Through Road" and which, in fact, came to a full stop only fifty yards beyond the Lodge, where there was a five-barred gate separating it from a meadow.

The other dwelling in this lane was a cottage belonging to the farmer who also owned the meadow and was occupied by the cowman and his wife, Ted and Beryl Meeker. This couple were normally in residence during seven days of the week, cows not having mastered the art of shutting off the milk supply at the convenience of their guardians, but this weekend the Meekers had taken time off, by previous arrangement, in order to visit their son and daughter-in-law in Basingstoke. They had returned home on Sunday evening, twenty-four hours ahead of Cecil and his mother, and during that time had neither seen nor heard any person or vehicle entering the lane. They were an alert, sensible, inquisitive couple, and it was mainly on their negative evidence that Sergeant Fiske had based his premise that the raid had taken place sometime on Saturday and that the perpetrators had been exceptionally lucky or—much more likely—exceptionally well briefed.

According to Cecil's own version, narrated in detail at every bridge party, parish meeting, and accidental encounter in the village in the days to come, he and his mother were admirably philosophical about the loss of their few small treasures.

"Can't be helped, can it?" he asked in an unfailingly jaunty tone. "Just one of those things. The only really unpleasant part was knowing that those rotten people had been prying about all over the house, poking their scruffy noses into our most intimate affairs. Leaves a nasty taste in the mouth for a while, but one gets over it, I daresay. My mother's taking it splendidly. The only thing that really got her down was all that dust the police sprayed over everything when they were looking for fingerprints."

He elected to speak for them both, but various diligent and kind-hearted friends who called to condole, and who included Pamela and Mr. Soames, the vicar, were not by any means convinced that Mrs. Bartlett was so unaffected by the event as he would have them believe. They were both of the opinion that it had shocked her profoundly and that she had become noticeably more grey and shaky since it had occurred.

Their visits had overlapped and they walked up as far as the road

together, Pamela having been obliged to park her car there, owing to the lane being partially blocked by a police car. Sergeant Fiske climbed out of this as soon as she had driven off, and caught up with Mr. Soames, strolling along with him as far as the vicarage, and thus becoming a party to his sad misgivings.

However, in spite of it all, Mrs. Bartlett continued to maintain that she was not in the least nervous about being left on her own of an evening, and Cecil continued to play to perfection his role of the extra man.

It was to be the first of a series of burglaries in the neighborhood which took place during that spring and early summer, and the pattern in each case was similar enough to persuade Sergeant Fiske that they were all the work of the same gang. In the first place, it was usually only the smaller, more easily transportable articles that were removed. There was nothing unique about that, but they had been so expertly selected—authentic gems and precious stones taken, semi-precious and imitation left alone—that he quite rejected the idea that there could be more than one such highly fastidious set of villains operating simultaneously in the same field.

The second feature in common was that all the break-ins had occurred, as in the case of Hurst Lodge, when the owners were away from home and their intended absence had been well advertised in advance. So far as the Bartletts were concerned, for example, anyone who had bothered to spend a couple of hours in the village pub, or had a friend who was employed locally as a gardener or domestic help, would have needed to be stone deaf not to have realized that they were planning the amazing, unprecedented step of spending three nights in Devonshire.

As for General Sir Robert Harcourt-Browne, whose premises were the fourth to be invaded, the Royal Garden party to which he and his wife had been invited, and the equally glorious dinner party in St. James's Palace which was to follow it, had been talked about so much that everyone was quite sick to death of the subject long before the day arrived.

All this made Dick Stevenson most uneasy. He became quite tiresomely obsessive about it, padding round the house each night, checking every lock and bolt on every door and window at least four times before he could be persuaded to go to bed, until at last Pamela was driven to say, "I shouldn't bother if I were you, Dick. As far as I can make out,

these marauders are going up in the world, not down. I think you should reconcile yourself to the fact that we've been bypassed and that they have bigger fish to fry than they can find here."

And so it proved, for only two days later Swains Manor, the ancestral home of the Jepson sisters, became the next house to be ransacked, although this time there was a small but significant break in the pattern.

Normally when the Jepsons intended to be away from home for more than a few days, and particularly when they were going abroad—which, for some inexplicable reason, always seemed to make a deserted house that much more vulnerable—they carted all their most valuable silver and jewelry down to the bank and gave detailed information to the police concerning their absence. This time, however, the journey had been undertaken at very short notice, the oracle of a specialist having warned Mary that the first half of June was the most dangerous period in the whole calendar for the asthma sufferer and that she would be well advised to escape to the pristine mountain air. By an astonishing stroke of luck, a colleague of the specialist who ran a combined hotel and clinic not far from Montreux had received a last-minute cancellation and was able to offer them accommodation at the height of the season. In the scramble to get away before the pollen count overtook them, Anne and Mary had neglected some of the routine precautions. Only their closest friends knew of their imminent departure.

Several days elapsed before they were able to return and give a complete account of the missing property, but during that time Sergeant Fiske had made one very interesting discovery.

"Well done, Fiske! That was quite a neat job," the Chief Superintendent said a few days later, striving to inject affability into his voice.

The truth was that he was not particularly drawn to this sergeant, privately suspecting him of having a pretty good opinion of himself underneath that modest, irritatingly deferential exterior. On the other hand, he prided himself on not allowing personal prejudice to influence him in apportioning credit where it was due, and there could be no doubt that these burglaries, taking place in such quick succession and covering such a small area, had begun to be quite an embarrassment. Unfortunately, perhaps, there was no denying either that it was due largely to Fiske's resourcefulness and initiative that those responsible were now under arrest.

"Thank you very much, sir," Fiske replied, somewhat in the manner of one who only omitted to pull his forelock because his haircut conformed so strictly to the regulations. "It was mainly luck, really," he added as a dutiful afterthought.

"Ah, well, yes, it so often is, isn't it? And what particular stroke of luck were you blessed with this time?"

"Actually, there were two, sir, in a manner of speaking—though both connected with hair, funnily enough. That's to say, one canine and one human."

"That is a bit less run-of-the-mill, I admit. Let's take the human one first, shall we?"

"Well, you see, sir, that was when I asked Mrs. Bartlett if she'd mind removing her wig."

"Good God, man, you're not serious? What on earth did you want to do that for?"

"It's a-bit of a long story, sir. Have you time?"

"Go ahead, Sergeant," the Superintendent said, glancing down at his watch.

"Well, you see, sir, it's like this. Naturally, I wouldn't expect you to know, but in my spare time I'm a member of the Operatic Society. Don't get much in the way of parts, to be truthful, because I'm not what they designate as dependable. Can't always guarantee to turn up for rehearsals, if you follow me."

"I follow you perfectly, thank you, Fiske."

"So usually I'm just part of the chorus and that, but I'm able to give a helping hand in a general sort of way, scene shifting and suchlike, and the last production they put on was a thing called *Oklahoma!* I don't know whether you've ever seen that show, sir?"

"Yes, as a matter of fact, I have, several times—though I fail to see what connection it has with Mrs. Bartlett."

"Well, it's like this, sir. In that production I was helping with the costumes—what they call the wardrobe—and they had this lady who was playing the grandmother's part. She had to spend most of her time in a rocking chair, fairly belting it out, so naturally it's not easy to find someone who looks right and has the right voice as well."

"So it's played by a singer who's made up to look older than she is, and wears a wig? I'm with you, Fiske—but is this leading up to telling me that the theatrical tricks you learned while appearing in *Oklahoma!*

enabled you to detect that Mrs. Bartlett was *also* made up to look older than she is, and was *also* wearing a wig?"

"No, sir, I can't claim to have noticed it off my own bat. It was the vicar who put me onto it."

"The vicar," the Superintendent repeated in a flat voice.

"That's right, sir—Mr. Soames. Very nice, kind-hearted gentleman. Very knowledgeable too. I daresay you'd know him?"

"No, I can't say I do. Does this story have any point, by the way, let alone an ending?"

"Just coming to that, sir. Mr. Soames told me that he felt very anxious about Mrs. Bartlett and the bad effect this burglary had had on her. He mentioned how much older and more grey she was looking since it happened. I was a bit puzzled by that and I asked him whether he meant literally that her hair had turned more grey, and he said, why, yes, he supposed he did.

"Well, that puzzled me all the more. I mean, I've heard of people's hair turning white overnight, but I never really believed it. I can see how some shock or other might turn it white at the roots, but would it carry right through to all the other parts as well?"

"I don't know, Fiske. Without wishing to hurry you—"

"Well, I didn't know either, but it made me take a closer look at Mrs. Bartlett next time I went there and that's when I saw she was wearing a wig. And, what's more, unless I was much mistaken, it was a different wig, with a lot more grey in it, from the one she'd been wearing the first time."

"And did it not strike you that her reason for wearing it might be that her own hair was falling out? That she could possess two wigs, or half a dozen, and not necessarily all of exactly the same color?"

"Yes, sir, it did, which is why I didn't pay overmuch attention to it at that stage. Only I couldn't altogether get it out of mind. And when we got lumbered with the second burglary—which was up at Crofts Farm, if you recall, and very much in the same style as the first one, much more economical and refined than we usually have to deal with—well, that's when I got the idea it might be worthwhile doing a bit more research on the Bartletts."

"You did, did you?"

"Yes. You see, another thing the vicar told me about them was that they hadn't been here all that long, not much above a year, and when

I asked him where they lived before he said it was in Devonshire. He couldn't recall that either of them had ever mentioned the exact spot, but, as it happened, he knew that too. Once when he'd called at Hurst Lodge there'd been a couple of letters just delivered and still lying on the doormat. So he'd picked them up and noticed that one of them had been redirected from Tavistock. It had stuck in his mind because that was a place where he'd spent a lot of holidays when he was a boy."

"So you centered your researches on Tavistock and discovered that a year or two ago there'd been a series of crimes in that area very similar to our own?"

"Exactly, sir."

"All of which could have been the purest coincidence?"

"Except that something happened here soon afterwards which took things that bit further. That was when Swains Manor came under attack, as you might say. It differed in one or two small ways from the previous ones. Seemed to have been carried out in more of a hurry and the place wasn't left so neat and tidy afterwards. There were these dog hairs on one of the carpets."

"Go on," the Superintendent said, Fiske having paused for the incredulous or derisive reaction he had evidently been expecting.

"Well, sir, if it had been one of the other houses, that wouldn't have signified. They all had any amount of dogs wandering about the place, but Swains Manor belongs to the Miss Jepsons, and—"

"It's all right, Fiske, you don't have to explain. I'm up there in the vicar's league with this one. The Jepson family was well known in this neighborhood long before you were born, and Miss Anne and I sit on several of the same committees. In fact, only last week she was telling me about this peculiar allergy her sister has developed to dogs. Can't be within forty yards of one without getting the sneezes. Am I right?"

"Quite right, sir," Fiske admitted, looking crestfallen.

"So, back to you, then! What did you do with these specimen hairs?"

"Put them in an envelope and took them round to Hurst Lodge to make some comparisons."

"And of course they matched to perfection? Pity they didn't have wigs made for the dogs while they were about it. Was that when you asked Mrs. Bartlett to remove hers?"

"Yes, sir. She caught me at it, you see. There I was on my knees, holding one of these terriers by the collar with one hand and these hairs

in the other, and she let out this powerful scream. Rage or fear, I don't know which it was, but I looked up and saw her on the staircase and it was just like *Oklahoma!* all over again. This old woman's head with a young woman's voice coming out of it. Quite a jolt it gave me."

"I can imagine. And so that's how you discovered that she wasn't Cecil's mother after all, but Cecil's wife, and the pair of them have been carrying on this game for years in various parts of the country, notably Devonshire, where I understand the mastermind of this enterprise, Dorothy Fanshawe, still has her headquarters?"

"That is quite correct, sir. With him playing the popular bachelor part, in and out of all the best houses, and familiarizing himself with the habits and routines of their owners, while she—"

"Kept up the role of the poor old invalid lady, to ensure that no one ever got a proper look at theirs. Yes, most ingenious, and in my opinion you haven't done at all badly. And now I must get along home to my dinner, otherwise I shall be in trouble. Where are you off to? Another rehearsal with the Operatic Society tonight?"

"I may look in there, sir. They're auditioning for *Iolanthe* this week."

"Oh, yes, that's the one about the poor chap who was half-man, half-fairy, isn't it? Shouldn't have thought that would be a great deal of use to you in a neighborhood like this. Still, you can never tell in these days, can you? Good night, Sergeant."

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SAP-2 had been the beginning of the end for Senator Blurbmore . . .

SAP-3

by **GARY
ALEXANDER**



I should have trusted my first instincts about the guy. When he walked into my office with that honest smile and sincere handshake, I should have bounced him out on the spot. He was clean-cut and his blue eyes were aglow with compassion and intelligence. Jack Armstrong in Brooks Brothers.

I took an instant dislike to him.

"Mr. Flemm, please."

"Mr. Flemm is in conference today," I said. "Whatever you're selling, he doesn't need any."

"Gosh, if I could just speak to him for a few minutes. . . ."

"What did I just say?" I demanded.

His eyes narrowed and his smile tilted, mean and asymmetrical. "O.K., so my dog-and-pony routine bombed. Let's get down to it. Your boss isn't in conference. My guess is that Ogden Flemm is locked in his office, drowning in his own sweat. I doubt that the Attorney General called him in this morning to compare golf scores."

He handed me a business card and a brochure, then sat down uninvited. "I can wait if he doesn't stall me too long. He needs me worse than I need him."

Maybe I had misjudged the guy. I studied his card: William D. Battson, Sales Manager, Obfuscation Electronics. The brochure described a computer system called SAP-3. It rang a bell.

"Senator Blurbmore. He had one, didn't he?"

"That was the SAP-2," Battson said defensively. "We were too hasty in marketing it. At a press conference during the campaign, someone compared Blurbmore's foreign-policy statements to the Kellogg-Briand Pact. Blurbmore had never heard of the Kellogg-Briand Pact, among many other subjects. Neither had SAP-2. We'd given it an inadequate memory, so the screen went blank and so did Blurbmore. He'd become so dependent on it after his victory in the primary he just stood there and stammered.

"That was the beginning of the end. But I understand Widge Blurbmore is back in the used-car business and doing quite nicely. In SAP-2, we had failed to realize that a politician is required to cloud an infinite number of issues, most of which he knows nothing about. SAP-3 holds enough data to answer virtually anything, evading the touchiest questions."

I studied the brochure more closely. SAP, an acronym for Selective Ambivalence Program, consisted of a portable computer with a small printout screen connected to the main unit by a thin wire. Three cleverly disguised screen options were available: clipboard, notepad, and opened Bible. The system was designed for people who had to account for their sins before a large group. It fielded questions, then printed out lengthy, confusing replies for the client, who gave the appearance of responding from notes or memory. The deluxe model also programmed outright lies

that couldn't be substantiated. A five-year warranty guaranteed that SAP-3's answers would have absolutely no substance—nor could a single word in them be used to the advantage of a rival or a court of law.

I wadded the brochure and made a bank shot into the corner wastebasket. "Impressive, Mr. Battson, but Ogden Flemm is a businessman, not a politician."

"I know, but it's not an election year, so we've decided to penetrate the private sector, soliciting those who need us the most. SAP-3 is equally effective in dealing with grand juries, environmental zealots, and Howard Cosell interviews. Your Mr. Flemm, as president of Meaningful Industries, is between a rock and the proverbial hard place. I know for a fact that the Attorney General is mildly curious as to why your management is so closely interlocked with individuals whose principal products include heroin and concrete footwear."

I had to concede that Battson had done his homework. Our latest flap hadn't even hit the media yet. Still, this wasn't our biggest problem. Our legal staff is comparable to a school of hammerhead sharks; they could delay prosecution of these charges indefinitely. But the annual stockholders' meeting was less than a week away. Ogden and I had both lost sleep over that prospect.

I gave Battson my best poker bluff. "I don't know what you're talking about, and even if there *were* a grain of truth to it, Mr. Flemm is capable of handling his own problems without your gadget."

Battson laughed and took a tape recorder from his briefcase. "Indeed? Here's how Flemm 'handles' problems and one-on-one confrontations. Here's a recording of how he handled those women who picketed your Whipped Toppings Division earlier in the year, claiming there were enough carcinogens in your Yumi Foam to destroy western civilization." He turned on the machine.

"Uh—on the matter of that—I—uh—would—well, it is pure slander and inappropriate to come here and—actually—I could assert—uh—perhaps a point in our favor could be—not that we have—uh—"

I motioned Battson to shut it off. I remembered that nightmare well. Yumi Foam is off the shelves and the division's profits are down twenty percent. We could live with that despite the annoyance of our "silent partners." They had, after that fiasco, ordered Ogden to leave public statements to those who could speak under pressure without stumbling over their own tongues.

Our silent partners have bulges under their coats, no necks, and a most unforgiving attitude toward business setbacks. Their capital had allowed Meaningful Industries to grow at a phenomenal rate, capital generated through activities I care to know nothing about, capital with which we had been doing a wash-and-wear number in our Baby Food Division.

And that damn stockholders' meeting! Big shareholders were complaining about the adverse publicity and, when we chopped back the dividend payment for the third consecutive quarter, we caught rumblings of a possible *coup d'état*. If they succeeded, Meaningful would have new management and the lid would blow off Pandora's box. Ogden Flemm would get the boot. As his executive assistant, I'd be downstairs chasing my hat too. Our investors would be caught in the squeeze. Let me put it this way: if they'd been on the *Titanic*, I couldn't see them obeying the evacuation rules; I could picture them, one to a lifeboat, machine guns trained on the women and children.

At the meeting, the president's address would be obligatory. If we called him in sick it would really hit the fan. Ogden was committed, and he knew it. I'd called in professional speechwriters and representatives of every consciousness-raising scam I could locate in the phone book, to no avail. Ogden gets attacks of paranoia the way small children catch colds. The first time one of those militants hit below the belt, Ogden would wilt like last week's lettuce. Maybe Battson had the answer here. Maybe not. But it was worth a try.

"I have your card," I said casually. "I'll consult with Mr. Flemm and call you."

Battson yawned and checked his watch. "Don't consult forever. We have only a small number of units ready for delivery. I have appointments this week with an NFL team that went two-and-fourteen last season, a nuclear-power plant contractor, and an automobile manufacturer whose wares have been known to lose their brakes at inopportune times."

I could live with arrogance, but Battson was making that quality curdle. I considered teaching him the art of a double backflip out of the chrome-and-leather chair when I heard some commotion in the reception area.

I peeked out. The pneumatic-blonde we'd hired for the front desk was all wobbly knees and hand gestures. She was losing an argument to some men who demanded entry. I could swear I saw Mike Wallace and a camera crew.

I confirmed an appointment with Battson, shook his hand sincerely,

and went out for an early lunch by way of the fire stairs. . . .

Ogden Flemm, naturally, was skeptical. Ogden questioned everything. He could look persecuted if asked to carve the watermelon at a Fourth of July barbecue, assuming that the knife was designed for use on him later.

Ogden was dark, balding, and nervous. His eyes darted about like bumblebees in a Mason jar. His five o'clock shadow rarely emerged after noon.

Ogden was not a toastmaster prototype, but he had a flair for figures and shadowy alliances. We met at Lompoc, where we did time together as a result of misunderstandings involving the commodities market. I had been selling precious metals I didn't exactly have possession of; Ogden had been embarrassed regarding a million gallons or so of soybean oil—we had a lot in common. We were released within a month of each other and I tagged along with him when he started Meaningful Industries. The relationship has been good to me and I'm very fond and grateful, but I'll be damned if I'll allow some civil servant to take my fingerprints again because Ogden's strategy is to curl up under his desk in the fetal position.

"Hear him out, Ogden. It's all I ask."

"I don't trust computers," Ogden said. "How can you bribe a computer? They're so untrustworthy!"

I could feel myself sinking into a morass of bogeymen and SEC investigators. When Ogden's moods hit bottom, it was nigh impossible to break through to him.

Luckily, I had set up Battson's appointment for this moment and he arrived right on time.

While Battson set up the demonstration unit, I tried to assure Ogden that computers were reliable and couldn't be persuaded to turn state's evidence. Ogden selected the notepad option. It was a duplicate of a steno pad, wires and all.

Battson completed the hookup, explaining, "It prints your counterattack in a millisecond. We recommend, however, that you pause a moment before speaking and glare indignantly at your enemy. Our research has proven that a bit of intimidation drama is beneficial."

Battson turned on SAP-3 and said, "Allow me to demonstrate. Mr. Flemm, it is our understanding that your girl friend, a Miss Trixie Fennel, is on Meaningful's payroll as a consultant to the Lingerie Division when,

in fact, she does nothing but occupy the penthouse you provide at company expense."

Droplets of perspiration immediately formed on Ogden's upper lip. "I—"

"Please read SAP-3's reply," Battson ordered.

Ogden studied the ersatz steno pad for a moment. His beady eyes brightened. He began, "Let me respond in respect to that. Ms. Fennel is a valued professional, virtually indispensable to the product-development department of the Lingerie Division. The alleged penthouse is actually a salon where new lines are shown to clients, mostly foreigners. Unfortunately, you cannot verify this through them since they represent Third World countries that have experienced recent revolutions. Furthermore, in a corollary vein, I should touch upon the impact of monetary instability on our overseas exports which, irrespective of the balance sheets, in relationship to a softening market—"

I clocked it.

Ogden spewed double talk for a solid four minutes. I didn't understand a word, but SAP-3 had done its job. I could barely remember the opening reference to Trixie.

"You see?" Battson said. "SAP-3 led off with an unprovable lie, then got into pure misdirection."

"Fascinating," Ogden bubbled. "Try another one."

"Tell us, Mr. Flemm, why are the operating expenses of the Baby Food Division so high? Thousands and thousands of dollars for the purchase of split peas, while the division sold only a few hundred cases of split-peas-and-ham all year."

Oh-oh. He had struck right at the heart of our cocaine connection. But Ogden fielded it with ease.

"An oversimplification, I would say. Your figures fail to account for returns and also subsidiary usages of the raw material, usages which are too subtle and varied to itemize, pea for pea. Which leads me to another area of difficulty—the instability of the legume market. If I could make a comparison to cocoa futures and extrapolate—"

Five minutes flat. My head was spinning, yet Ogden had me believing that the split-pea bookkeeping transactions were sound and aboveboard, almost patriotic.

Ogden had lost his slouch. He was sitting ramrod straight, his face flushed with confidence.

"On to the stockholders' meeting," he said, writing Battson a check. "Bring on the traitors!"

The mood of the shareholders was pretty much as I had expected—kind of like a sellout crowd at the Colosseum awaiting the release of the lions. Ogden, despite SAP-3, was experiencing paranoia. I settled him down with mild dosages of Valium and Cutty Sark and had the air conditioning in the auditorium turned up full throttle to keep him as dry as possible.

The routine business was rushed through; and Ogden mounted the podium to deliver his address. His speech contained the usual pap—growth, corporate health, and so on. He didn't get three sentences into it before he was shouted down by angry questioners.

The first came from a dissident-colonel type who had been collecting a bushel of proxy votes. He demanded an accounting of the money that was not being paid out in dividends. He even mentioned one of our silent partners by name.

Ogden rambled nonstop for fifteen minutes, wrapping it with a tirade on ethnic stereotyping. His attacker slumped into his seat, obviously disoriented. The attack continued, but with less force—Ogden and SAP-3 deflected it easily.

An hour later I figured we had it made. The hostility had died out, and there was scattered applause. Half the people who remained were yawning.

Then it happened. A stockholder who always marched in step with management said, "Sir, I'm sorry to bother you with trivia, but I'm wondering if the shareholders will be invited to the corporate picnic this summer as usual."

The answer, of course, was yes. It had proved effective in years past, getting them together for a harmless social function. A very useful intelligence-gathering operation; we could identify and feel out possible malcontents.

Ogden looked down at his notepad. "It would be impossible either to confirm or deny at this point in time. Many variables and certain situation possibilities leave particular details unclear, and—"

When Ogden finally finished, the room was filled with whispers. Those who had been nodding off were alert now and looking at each other with squinted eyes.

An eccentric old lady took the floor next. I guess there's one at every

stockholders' meeting. She asked why in the photo collage on the cover of the annual report the Antihistamine Division had a segment larger than most of the other divisions. Was this significant?

Ogden should have referred her to the art department but no, damn it, he relied on SAP-3 again, and chattered on about the psychology of the color wheel and the compatibility of art and the profit motive.

The noise in the auditorium began to build to a low roar. Our most dangerous enemies leaped to their feet, grinning broadly, their nostrils flaring with the scent of blood.

"Mr. Flemm, sir, another picayune complaint. Forgive me, but the second floor men's room in the Meaningful Industries Tower is continually out of paper towels. I wonder if you could comment on that."

Ogden caught on. I was offstage and he glanced over at me. I could read his thoughts. The swine is baiting me, setting me up. What do I say? Is there something illegal about our paper-towel contract?

I fought the urge to shout at him. I hoped he could lip-read. Tell him to call a janitor. He knows something's wrong. He's trying to make a fool out of you. It has nothing to do with paper towels!

I didn't get through to him. Ogden pontificated about the woes of the domestic logging industry in general, the difficulties faced by paper and pulp mills in particular. He capped it with a plea for an embargo on Japanese wood products.

The low roar transformed into giggles. The next few questions were even more ludicrous, and Ogden answered them in kind, clinging tightly to his electronic security blanket.

Well, the inevitable occurred. The leaders of the palace revolt rallied and battered open the gate with sufficient votes to take over management of Meaningful Industries. Ogden and his team—including me—got the boot. It seemed that they could live with a crook as long as he was a competent crook, but they couldn't endure stupidity or the image of stupidity.

The new officers turned Meaningful inside out with the assistance of auditors and law-enforcement agencies. Right after the meeting, I cleaned out my desk—a sheaf of incriminating documents, a fossilized salami sandwich, a Smith and Wesson .38—and left town. I escaped indictment, but Ogden wasn't so fortunate. Neither were several of our silent partners. When Ogden failed to show up for the trial, the prosecuting attorney

made a lot of political hay, demanding higher bail for white-collar criminals. I knew better. May Ogden's soul rest in peace.

I don't much care for the climate where I'm living now, but I'll adapt. My beard's filling out nicely. I should be able to dye it in a couple of weeks. My false identification has held up so far. No hassles from the law either. I guess they're not all that interested, writing me off as small potatoes—a glorified private secretary.

I'm not deluding myself about the colleagues of our jailed silent partners, however. I'm no ostrich. I don't believe in miracles. These gentlemen don't merely hold grudges; they wear them.

But there's always light at the end of the tunnel, as they say. I picked a *Wall Street Journal* out of a trash can the other day. A page-one story featured Obfuscation Electronics, which had grown so rapidly it was gnawing at the bottom edges of the Fortune 500. William D. Battson, a new marketing veep, reported on the SAP-4. "It'll be available in less than a week. It does everything the SAP-3 did and more, and it's entirely self-contained, the size of a pocket calculator. Years of research have culminated in this startling advance."

Battson also answered charges that Obfuscation's products have attracted mostly less-than-reputable concerns.

"Even if it were possible," he said, "it goes against everything I have ever believed in to dictate to customers the morality of a manufactured product. We live in a free-enterprise system, not Albania. The Defense Department has placed an order for five thousand SAP-4s. How can you categorize the vanguard of our freedom as sleazy?"

I threw down the paper and sprinted to the nearest phone booth, planning to call Battson and order a SAP-4. He owes me a favor, so maybe he'll give me a nice discount.

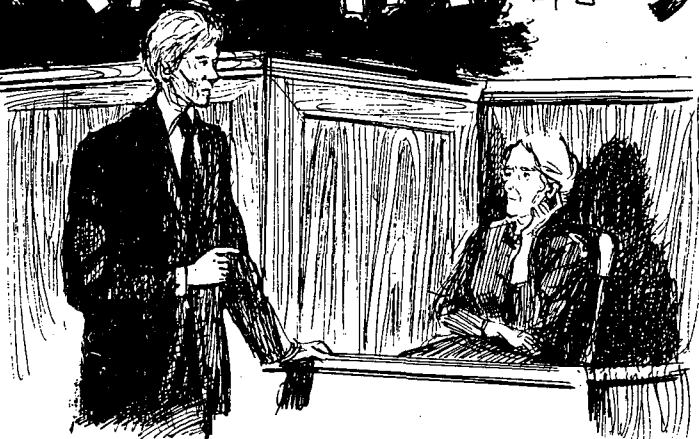
One of these days, someone is going to come up behind me and stick a silencer in my ear. There'll be little time for small talk. I'll pull out SAP-4 and chatter like a bluejay.

It might save my hide. Maybe.



The bottle of poison was their ace in the hole . . .

TRIAL TACTICS



by **JOE L. HENSLEY**

A month after I was admitted to the bar, my senior partner came to the door of my sparsely furnished office. Our shared quarters were on the second floor of a crumbling old building. But it was, at least, convenient to the courthouse.

"Busy?" he asked diffidently.

We weren't yet used to each other.

I waved the advance sheet I was reading. "Not really, Senator." I'd

already learned that a good part of my time was going to be spent keeping up with the latest fancies of the appellate courts.

"We," ex-Senator Adams said, "are going to prosecute a murder case next week." He smiled, looking like a man who'd bitten into a lemon, but that was the only way he could smile.

My partner had served three terms in the state senate and so was called, for now and always, Senator Adams. He was a tall thin man who looked something like an Abe Lincoln gone to seed. People said he'd once been a lawyer of true distinction. He'd semi-retired when he'd decided not to run again for the senate, but then his wife had become sick and the expenses of her long terminal illness had forced him back into practice.

He wore suits that were even more rumpled than mine. He was old and he looked perpetually tired, but I'd found him to be a scholarly man with a keen and wary brain. He'd spent much of the first month learning about me, asking me questions, giving me his answers. The first day in his office, for example, he'd asked me about ethics. I'd fumbled around for a time trying to recall all the dos and don'ts until he'd finally told me that for him being ethical was being able to face himself in the mirror each new day.

Back to the present. "I thought we *defended* criminal cases," I said.

"Normally that's true," he said. He shook his aging head and scuffed an embarrassed foot against the linoleum floor. "But my friend and yours, Cogger Rock, the prosecuting attorney, has to go into the hospital tomorrow for surgery. Time's running out on the Briscoe Henzmann murder case and Briscoe either gets prosecuted next Monday or he gets out. His attorney filed a motion for a speedy trial and Monday's the last day. So Rock's named us—or me—as special prosecutor."

"Why you?" I asked.

"Several reasons. I've tried cases against the attorney defending the case. I also once represented the chief prosecuting witness, Briscoe's sister Edith, in an estate claim a few years back. Maybe—even probably—the murder grew out of that. And I know Briscoe. He's been in prison several times. Rock believes I don't like Briscoe. Come with me, Robak—let's go over to Cogger's office." He lemon-smiled again and I observed he was wearing a badly frayed shirt again. "Helping me with the case will be good experience, and you'll even get paid for it."

I got to my feet, my day brightened by the unusual prospect of money.

Coger Rock sat fatly in his oversized chair. He was an obese man I much admired. I'd known him in law school where he'd been a year ahead of me. As a prosecutor I'd found him to be fair. He preferred no one.

"Senator Adams and Don Robak," he wheezed in greeting. "Sit down. Knowing you were due I took the liberty of asking Lieutenant Robbins, jack of all trades for the Bington Police property room, to come up. I asked him to bring the principal item of evidence along for you to see."

Lieutenant Robbins was holding a tiny wrapped package. He carefully unwrapped it and placed it ostentatiously on Rock's desk. It was an aspirin bottle, partly filled with something.

"That's our baby," he said. "It doesn't look like much, but it might be enough to cook Briscoe Henzinann. We found it in his bedroom closet. I did a fingerprint test on it and lifted one of Briscoe's prints off it."

"Briscoe kept a supply of strychnine sulfate in that bottle," Rock said. He held up his hand to forestall questions for the moment. "Are either of you gentlemen aware of the State versus Mindit?"

I shook my head. Senator Adams said, "It was a poison-murder case."

"Yes. The law in this state is most peculiar," Rock said. "In order to prove that an accused committed a poison murder you must either show proof of the accused purchasing the poison or show him in possession of it. Our local and state police canvassed all over trying to find evidence of the former, but strychnine's too common—it's an animal poison, there's lots of it around. Briscoe could have stolen it or bought it someplace else years ago. In any case, we couldn't put him together with a purchase."

"Knowing our problem, Thurman Cartner, Briscoe's lawyer, filed a motion for a speedy trial before we did the routine house search. He hasn't availed himself of discovery, so he doesn't know about the bottle. Lieutenant Robbins, who dabbles in lab work and ballistics in addition to being our fingerprint man, assures me that what we have in this bottle is strychnine. He can't, however, qualify as an expert on that point. We do have a local doctor who'll testify the deceased died of strychnine-poisoning. But the bottle was found after the fact, long after Briscoe was in jail. So I've made arrangements for a state toxicology-lab man to come here. He'll bring his equipment and testify in front of the jury about what's in the bottle."

"Maybe Briscoe and Thurman would deal if they knew about the bottle," Senator Adams said.

Rock shrugged. "They'd claim the poison was someone else's, or that we put it in the house. What's needed is for both of you to watch the bottle. Your old friend Thurman Cartner would do anything to win this one—or any one—and you know it, Senator." He shook his head dolefully. "I was looking forward to doing battle, but I've got a gall bladder that's turned traitor. I'm due at the hospital at four this afternoon and in surgery early in the morning."

He nodded at the police lieutenant, who carefully rewrapped his package.

"Why didn't you just send the bottle along to the state lab?" I asked Rock.

"Demonstrative evidence, Robak, my boy. Trial tactics. This case is vicious but thin. We do have some evidence, but it's all circumstantial. No one witnessed the killing.

"The deceased was a man named George Wood. He was related, through his wife, to Briscoe and his sister. Edith Henzmann took his wife in when she left Wood several years ago. Time passed; things were bitter. Then Wood and the wife had a partial reconciliation. My opinion is that Wood wooed her back because she had money.

"Mrs. Wood died—she fell down some steps. Bad things were hinted about that, but nothing formal happened on it. Briscoe and Edith Henzmann both filed claims in Mrs. Wood's estate for taking care of her during the time she was away from Wood. Both won their cases. You represented Edith, didn't you, Senator?"

"You know I did. I was also asked to take Briscoe's case but decided against it. He was very angry with me about it, but he's the kind of client no lawyer needs. Thurman took him on and won his case, but not without a hard fight. Edith Henzmann got about forty thousand dollars, Briscoe only about ten thousand."

He smiled wolfishly. "High pay for house care. I don't think it bothered Briscoe much that Edith got more than he did. He ran the house they jointly own with an iron hand."

Rock said, "Wood threatened Briscoe and Edith. Briscoe threatened Wood. Briscoe and Wood had several fistfights. We've half a dozen witnesses who'll testify they heard Briscoe threaten Wood's life at various times. So we believe Briscoe took part of the poison in the aspirin bottle, ground it fine, and put it in a number of things inside Wood's house. We found it in his whiskey, in a jar of instant coffee, in the table salt." He

nodded. "The liquor seems to have done Wood in. A neighbor found him long dead on his living-room floor with the whiskey bottle on a table nearby."

"I read about it in the local paper," Senator Adams said. "I had suspicions then that Briscoe could have been the killer."

"Then remember that without that poison bottle we have no case," Rock said. "So both of you watch it closely. There'll be a deputy sheriff guarding Briscoe, but keep an eye on Thurman Cartner."

Senator Adams laughed and looked at me. "Thurman has had three heart attacks and a stroke. He walks with a cane and probably ought to be in a wheelchair. But you're in for a treat, Donald. He's meaner than a summer snake. He'd try to start a fight at the Last Supper."

"You don't like him?" I asked.

Senator Adams smiled. "We once talked about a partnership, but it didn't work out." He patted my shoulder. "He's one of my closest friends."

Coger Rock nodded. "A good lawyer." He put his hand out and shook Senator Adams' hand. "The case is yours, Senator. Do with it what you will. I'll never question it."

It took the best part of two days to choose a jury. I'd spent the few days before trial interviewing some of the witnesses while Senator Adams interviewed others. It was a very thin case, but we did have evidence of the death threats and some very unpleasant photographs going for us. When a person dies of strychnine poisoning a condition usually occurs known as *risus sardonicus*, a horrible, twisted smile. The police photographer had captured that death grin. I thought the jury was going to want to punish someone for making them see and examine those pictures.

We spent the first few days after the jury was sworn getting deep into the agonizing death of George Wood and exhibiting those pictures to the jury.

Sitting with us at our table was the defendant's sister, Edith. I met her briefly on the opening day of the trial. She was a dried prune of a lady. She nodded every time a witness made a telling point for the prosecution, and frowned when a witness faltered. Her brother Briscoe sat on the other side of the courtroom and tried to stare her down—without success. Now and then he'd lean toward portly Thurman Cartner and whisper something.

Senator Adams went right after the case, pushing along.

Cartner had an objection for almost everything. He'd rise and point dramatically with his cane. He'd get red and angry and press his chest as if another, final heart attack was upon him. He badgered witnesses unmercifully, arguing about times and places, using any deviance he could find to confuse the jury. Sometimes the Senator rose to the bait and they'd argue cuttingly with each other.

Things seemed to go our way more often than not after the pictures of George Wood lying grinningly dead were exhibited. The judge started overruling most of Cartner's motions. But Cartner went ahead objecting. He was dogged and determined. He had a whiskey-red nose and his hair was completely white. His eyebrows looked like spring bushes covered with snow. He sat with a hand cupped over one ear most of the time. "What was that?" he'd bellow when a voice diminished.

"Why doesn't he get a hearing aid?" I whispered to Senator Adams.

"It's part of his scam. My bet is that he hears as well as he ever did. He's looking for sympathy. He wants the jury to see how oppressed he and his poor client are." He shook his head. "But he's not the trial lawyer he once was. He's lost most of his fire."

I looked at the Senator unbelievably, but he only nodded. "He told me that this will be his last case and he isn't going to lose it."

Our last witness on the seventh day of the trial was Lieutenant Robbins. He'd brought the poison bottle. Cartner and Briscoe looked aghast when he produced it. They exchanged furious whispers.

The Senator qualified Robbins as a fingerprint expert and the Lieutenant then testified about the fingerprint he'd found on the bottle, where he'd obtained the bottle, and where it had been kept since it had come into his possession. He testified that the contents of the bottle were the same now as when he'd found it and taken possession of it. But he could not, of course, testify to what the contents were. "I move the admission of State's Exhibit M into evidence," Senator Adams said.

Thurman Cartner was on his feet. "Hold on, here. I must object. I'll stipulate, in the interests of the court's and the jury's time, that chain of custody has been established and even that the defendant's fingerprint is on the proffered exhibit, which looks like an aspirin bottle to me and was found weeks after the defendant was in jail. But no one has testified as to what's in the bottle and so its offering is premature and not yet relevant."

The Senator arose.

"I'll withdraw the offer for now and do it tomorrow through a witness from the state toxicologist's lab."

I could see that this affected Cartner badly. He took a step backward, shook his head, and sat down heavily.

The judge nodded and looked at his watch. "Nine in the morning, gentlemen." He admonished the jury not to discuss the case with anyone, pre-decide it, or read, watch, or listen to news stories concerning it, and let them go.

I watched Cartner. He was looking at the bottle apprehensively. It sat in plain view on the court stenographer's desk. Briscoe had his eye on it also.

"May Lieutenant Robbins take the bottle with him and return it tomorrow?" Senator Adams asked the judge.

Cartner objected weakly but was overruled.

We walked back to the office.

"I want you to do the direct on Edith Henzmann tomorrow," the Senator said.

I was surprised.

"You talked to her; I didn't. What should I ask?"

"I've a list of questions made out for you. I want to lean back for a time and observe things." He shook his head. "I'm getting some peculiar feelings about this trial."

I could see he was tired, but not as tired as Cartner.

"O.K.," I said. "Have you got the list?"

He reached into his briefcase and handed it to me. I read it as we walked. The questions delved into how long Edith and Briscoe had lived together, how he'd hated Wood, how many times she'd heard him threaten Wood.

The Senator had underlined the final question. "Ask Edith how Briscoe threatened to kill Wood—by what method?"

The Senator said, "Let's forget the office tonight and go get a long drink."

"Motion granted. How exactly *did* Briscoe threaten to kill Wood?"

"He said Wood ought to be poisoned like a dog."

"Dynamite!" I said. "Guilty as charged."

He shook his head, not that sure.

Just old, I thought.

Next morning our man from the state toxicologist's office was waiting in the hall with two suitcases full of equipment, ready to go to work.

Edith Henzmann took the stand. The poison bottle sat on the court stenographer's desk, tagged and ready.

I asked my questions loud and clear, fighting to keep nervousness out of my voice.

Thurman Cartner had his hand cupped near his ear, but he didn't need to ask Edith Henzmann to speak up. If my questions were loud, her answers were louder. Her prune face was filled with outraged righteousness. Now and then she'd rub at her right ear as if it hurt or itched.

I'd figured out that in a way she was not only our best witness but also our worst. If Briscoe and Wood had feuded, then she'd been in the middle of the feud. She'd had as much motive and opportunity as her brother. I could see Cartner waiting to get her on cross-examination, writing down questions, shaking his head at the answers she gave me.

I saved the best question for last.

"In what manner or fashion, Miss Henzmann, did you hear your brother threaten to kill George Wood?"

Thurman Cartner rose to his feet for an objection. I waited him out. I watched Senator Adams, unable to read him. He sat listlessly at our table.

"Overruled," the judge said.

"Your Honor," Thurman Cartner said in a hurt voice, as if his own honor had been sullied.

"Sit down, Mr. Cartner. Your objection is overruled." He nodded at me. "Ask it again, Mr. Robak, if you desire."

Asking the question again gave extra importance to it. The judge was nailing another corner on Briscoe's coffin.

"Miss Henzmann—did you hear your brother threaten George Wood?"

"Yes. Many times."

"In what manner or fashion did your brother threaten to kill George Wood?"

She rubbed at her ear again. "He said several times that he ought to be poisoned like the damned dog he was."

"Liar!" Briscoe Henzmann screamed in rage. He was up and across the room in an instant.

For moments everything became a blur. The deputy sheriff pursued Briscoe. Spectators in the back of the courtroom ran for the exits. I stepped between Edith and Briscoe. I was too large for him to get past so he fled toward the windows, passing the court stenographer at full gallop, overturning her chair, and knocking her to the floor. Papers went flying.

At the window Briscoe kept right on going, smashing through the glass. It was fifteen feet down to the ground below, but he was already bounding across the courthouse yard by the time I arrived at the smashed window with the deputy.

We watched him disappear into an alley while the deputy was still unholstering his gun. "We'll catch him," he said shamefacedly as he stared out the ruined window.

I turned back. The Senator was helping the court reporter pick up papers.

The poison bottle wasn't among the papers. Nor was it on the desk. We looked under everything. It was gone.

"He got it when he went past," the deputy said. He nodded, convincing himself. "I think I saw him grab it."

They apprehended Briscoe later that afternoon, hiding on the riverbank, but there was by then no poison bottle on his person. Earlier Thurman Cartner had insisted that the deputy sheriff search both himself and his briefcase for the missing bottle, and had smiled tolerantly all through the negative search.

The judge waited an hour and then declared a mistrial. That left the state free to try Briscoe all over again—but not successfully, of course, without the poison bottle.

The Senator and I went to the hospital that afternoon and tried to explain what had happened to Cogger Rock. I let Senator Adams do the talking. He seemed revived. His step was almost springy when we entered the recovering prosecutor's room.

"The breaks of the game," Cogger said philosophically from his overburdened bed. "We can get Briscoe for the escape and for a couple of burglaries. Maybe it's better. It wasn't that good a case."

Senator Adams nodded. "I became somewhat uncertain about it while we were trying it."

"Why was that?" Cogger asked.

The Senator said, "It could have been Edith. When she was on the stand she had an annoying habit. In the claim case every time she made up a lie or added to it she'd punish herself by batting at an ear or scratching—an unconscious thing. She did that often today."

Coger nodded. "It was either Edith or Briscoe. I'll admit I put the heat on her to testify once we found the bottle in Briscoe's closet. But she hated Briscoe. She could have put the poison in a bottle he'd used and hid it where we found it. She invited us inside and led us around when we appeared with our search warrant."

"If Briscoe was convicted she'd have had the house to herself."

Coger nodded. "It's academic. Without the bottle, under the Mindit decision, the case against Briscoe is dead." He smiled at us. "Thanks anyway."

The afternoon paper had a big splash of a story. Briscoe was, by that time, back in jail, suffering from lacerations and a sprained ankle. He was unrepentant and not answering any questions.

I moped around the office until Senator Adams invited me to join him for drinks and dinner at the downtown Moose. On the way, he informed me we would be joining Thurman Cartner there.

I sat with them at a scarred, ancient table and tried to pace my drinking with theirs. Thurman, outside the courtroom, was a smiling, easy man. He and the Senator told stories about each other. I was intrigued by these two aging warriors, entranced by their stories of an older, easier time.

It didn't take Cartner long to broach the subject of the Briscoe case.

"I was going to try Edith on cross-examination for the murder," Cartner said. "A mean woman. She could have done it as easily as Briscoe."

"It isn't our problem any more," Senator Adams said. "Robak and I have returned the case to Coger."

"Would Coger still listen to you?"

"Maybe."

"Tell him I'd plead Briscoe to some small crime—burglary, escape, whatever." He tapped the table with his old, rough hand. "I thought you gentlemen had me when you came up with that bottle. I was sure of it."

The Senator stood up. I thought he looked a bit upset. He said, "I have to use the telephone."

He went and used the phone at the bar for a few moments, then walked

toward the restroom. Between the day and the drinks, his conduct worried me. I excused myself and followed him.

He was standing in the deserted washroom before a mirror, examining his reflection.

I remembered his statement about ethics.

When he saw me reflected in the mirror behind him he said, "She did do it. I know that now. And Cartner would have lost this one—his last case." He looked again at his own reflection. Then he reached into his pocket, took out the bottle, uncapped it, and poured the contents into the washbowl, dissolving it down the drain in a stream of hot water. He dropped the bottle on the floor and ground it under his heel.

"I called the sheriff. I'd ordered the house searched again. They found a cache of strychnine in Edith's sugar canister."

I nodded, understanding some of it, but not everything. I'd not lived his life, but in that moment I wished I had.

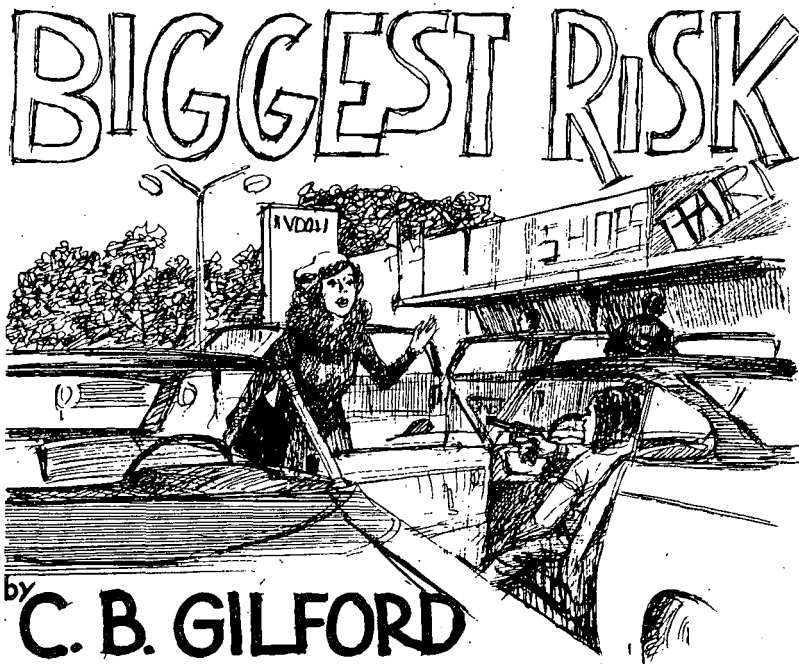
I left him there, still looking at himself in the mirror. He seemed pleased enough.

Cartner had ordered a new round of drinks. "Is he all right?" he asked.

The scene inside the washroom was still with me and I knew it would be for a long time. "I think his mirror says so," I said.



He liked taking chances . . .



He preferred to work in the sunshine. In the big department-store parking lot, for instance, there was an attendant after dark. None during the day. So in a way that made it easier. But in another way it took more nerve. That made him feel good, knowing he had nerve.

He got there early in the afternoon, spent an hour or so before he made his choice. He didn't appear suspicious to anyone because he was well dressed, and he might have been there on legitimate business, such

as waiting for his wife while she shopped. He strolled around, looking at the cars and at the people who got out of them. Especially the women.

He considered several. There was the middle-aged lady in the black Cadillac who carried a huge purse. The purse interested him, but the lady was frail, possibly had heart trouble, might scare too easily. He didn't want that. There was the tallish blonde in the tailored slacks. The slacks interested him too, and the way she walked in them. He even followed her a bit. But she was athletic, she carried her head high, and she was sort of fearless-looking. He felt slightly afraid of her. And he couldn't have that.

The choice eventually was a kind of in-between. She drove up in a fiery-red hardtop. He watched her climb out, nyloned legs first, then a sleek black dress and fur piece. Very stylish, he thought. Thirty maybe, undoubtedly married, with a good figure that was just beginning to incline a little to weight. Maybe she dyed her hair a bit, but her face was young, smooth, rather happy.

He followed her too. She was unaware of it, because her spike heels clattered noisily on the pavement. He liked her walk, her clothes. She had money, he thought, a husband who let her spend it, and not a care in the world. "You'll do," he said softly. "I'll wait for you." And he let her go into the store.

He sauntered back to his own car. It was easy to find among all the newer, shinier models. His was an eight-year-old sedan with imperfect paint and a layer of dust. But it was not old or dirty enough to be conspicuous. He drove it to the empty parking place next to the red hardtop. He backed into the spot so that the driver's doors of the two cars were side by side. Then he sat patiently.

An hour passed. Two hours. The autumn sun had made it warm inside the car, and several times he wiped perspiration from his face. He consulted his watch occasionally. But he was in no real hurry. Even if it got dark and the attendant came on duty and he had to leave, there was still no great loss. Tomorrow would be another day.

But she came, just before five o'clock. He saw the swishing black dress and heard the clicking of the spike heels. She carried no packages, which pleased him. He wasn't interested in the lingerie or perfume she might have bought. But she must have bought something, because she seemed happy. As she came close he could hear her humming gaily.

He allowed her to pass between the two cars, but before she could

unlock and open the door of hers, he opened his own. She was trapped there, but she didn't realize it at first. She stood back, still humming, and waited for him to close the door and leave. When he failed to do this, but stared at her instead, she looked just a trifle annoyed and said, "Pardon me, but I'd like to get in my car."

"Get into mine," he told her, and showed her his gun.

This was the crucial moment, he knew. She could turn and run, and he wouldn't dare pursue her or shoot. Or she could scream, which would make him jump into his car and drive away fast, hoping she wouldn't think to note the license number. But she didn't do either of these things, because he had the advantage of shock and surprise.

"Get in," he repeated in a harder tone.

Her face was deathly pale and her jaw was slack, letting tiny folds of flesh show at her throat. She was thirty-five rather than thirty, he decided. But he still wanted her. He waved the gun in the direction he desired her to go. She climbed in hastily, wriggling desperately past the steering wheel. He put the gun in his left-hand coat pocket and followed her.

"Don't try to attract anybody's attention or I'll kill you," he warned.

She sat very still, staring straight ahead. She'll behave, he thought. He started the engine. The car moved unmolested out of the parking lot, headed down a side street, away from the mainstream of rush-hour traffic. They drove for fifteen minutes without conversation, weaving gradually toward the outskirts of town, using little-traveled roads. But he could just as easily have driven through the business sections. She gave him no trouble.

When he was almost at his destination, he gave her a curt order. "Get out of sight. Lie down on the seat."

She obeyed quickly. He drove on for two minutes more, to all outward appearances alone in the car. He turned into a driveway, through garage doors he had left standing open. Then he cut the ignition, got out, and shut the garage doors from the inside. When he returned to the car and switched on the dome light, she was still crouching where he had left her.

"You can sit up now," he told her.

She responded like a puppet. Her hair was mussed now. She didn't look quite as stylish as before. "What do you want with me?" she asked in a hoarse whisper and with a kind of choking dread, as if she knew the answer.

He smiled, knowing what she must be thinking. And knowing how wrong she was, how she underestimated him.

But already it seemed that the uncertainty of her fate was frightening her the most. "Are you going to rob me?" she asked him.

Yes, he thought, among other things. "Give me your purse," he said.

She handed it to him without question. He fished in it, found a wallet. It contained two twenties and three ones. He shoved the bills carelessly into his pocket, handed back the big purse, and then commenced to examine the rest of the contents of the wallet.

"Mrs. Lucille Roth," he read from the driver's license. "Is that you?"

"Yes."

"Always like to know who I've got."

She was looking around the interior of the garage. The dim wooden walls pressed close in around the car, and what might be beyond the walls or how near another human being might be she couldn't know, of course. She was perfectly alone in this narrow space with him.

"Roth," he said. "Familiar name. Not the auto stores?"

"Yes. My husband is James Roth."

"Any children?"

"Two. Girl seven and a boy three."

Obviously she was wondering whether these facts would help her. So he wore a smile which told her nothing.

He consulted the back of the driver's license. "Looks like you've had a few tickets, Lucy," he commented, using her name deliberately. "Speeding, driving through a red light. I'll bet you don't like cops, do you, Lucy?"

Her eyes widened, but she said nothing.

"Bet you'd like to have a couple of them here right now though, wouldn't you?"

She stared at him, and he smiled again and continued exploring the wallet. Membership cards mostly—Junior League, country club, Philharmonic Orchestra Association, P.T.A. All very high-and-mighty. At the bottom of everything was a small snapshot. The two kids. He waved it at her. "What are their names?" he wanted to know.

"Lisa and Douglas."

"Fancy."

She seemed to take a little courage from his sneer. "What do you want with me?" she asked him again.

"You wearing any jewelry?" he asked in return.

For an answer she peeled the black glove off her left hand, tugged a time or two, then handed him a pair of rings. He glanced at them. Wedding and engagement ring. The latter had a good-sized diamond in it. He put them into his pocket, although he knew he'd never have the nerve to try to sell them.

"What about the watch?"

She gave it to him.

"Earrings?"

They came off quickly. She didn't seem to feel any pain as she wrenched them from her ears.

He stowed everything in the same pocket.

"Is that all?"

"Yes, that's everything. Now will you let me go?"

He shook his head.

"But you wanted to rob me. You've got everything. Let me go."

"Who said I wanted to rob you?" he questioned mockingly.

"But you have."

"Oh, sure. As long as you're here. But I didn't go to all this trouble just for forty-three bucks and some cheap jewelry."

She swallowed, and had trouble doing it. Her thoughts were clear in her face—she wasn't going to escape with the minimum loss and inconvenience; there was worse in store. "What are you going to do?" she asked slowly.

He was silent. Let her guess.

"Listen," she said after a moment. "My husband doesn't have a lot of money. Really he doesn't. We spend it too fast. But he can scrape together a few thousand. I know he can do that. And he'll do it without any questions. I'll write him or call him, whatever you want me to do. This is a kidnapping, isn't it?"

He let her rave, then he answered quietly, "Who said it was a kidnapping?"

"But you want money, don't you?"

"Sure, everybody does. But money isn't everything."

She closed her eyes, seemed to be making a supreme effort to control herself. Even without eyes her face was eloquent. She was afraid, on the edge of terror.

"There's only one thing left," she said.

Still he refused to give her a clue to his intentions. Finally she opened her eyes again; the terror was there, waiting to give voice to a scream. But she didn't scream.

"I have two children and I love my husband," she told him.

He merely looked at her.

"Get it over with," she said. "I won't fight you. I don't want to get hurt."

She was smarter than most, he thought. He liked that. It fitted in with his plans. Too bad for her though.

She'd closed her eyes again. He reached across the seat and took her by the shoulders. As she'd promised, she didn't resist. She came limply, like a sack full of something soft, or like a dead thing. He kissed her on the mouth. Dead flesh. He pushed her back, then struck as hard as he could with his left palm on the side of her face. She opened her eyes, surprised as he knew she'd be. He laughed softly.

"You think you're beautiful, I suppose, huh, Lucy? You think you're so damned beautiful that every man who sees you wants to rape you. You've got your nerve all right."

She sat back in her corner of the seat and stared at him. She seemed to be feeling something between relief and fear of the yet unknown. But the fear, because she was still here with him, was the stronger.

"What do you want then?" she asked.

He didn't tell her.

"If it isn't robbery or kidnapping—or rape—what is it then? What is there left?"

Now she was on the track.

She watched with fascination as he reached into the dashboard compartment and drew out a flashlight. "Get out," he ordered, "and go around to the back of the car."

She obeyed, groping in the dimness, and he followed her. He'd taken the car keys with him and now he unlocked the trunk, lifted the heavy metal cover till it clicked into the full open position. "Get inside," he said.

For the first time she failed to do as she was told. "What for?" she demanded with a sudden spark of courage.

He wondered, if she decided to fight, if he could handle her without harm to himself. A shot might be heard outside. He'd have to subdue her with his own strength. She was not a small woman. But she was soft.

He knew that from having touched her. Reflecting on her softness renewed his own courage.

He spoke with remorseless authority. "I've drilled air holes in the floor, so you won't suffocate. And I've taken all the tools out, incidentally. So don't think you'll find a wrench in there to brain me with. Now climb in."

He illuminated her dark prison with his flashlight. She went into it slowly, gingerly, clumsily. He wanted to laugh—and he did—at the ridiculous picture she made, sleek nylons, tight black dress, fur piece and all, scrambling into the dirty, dusty hole. In the process she lost one of her shoes. He picked it up from the garage floor, an expensive-looking black suede job. Hardly a weapon, but it would make a loud noise if pounded on metal.

"Gimme the other one," he ordered.

She handed it to him meekly. He threw them both into a corner. Then he took the little box from his pocket, opened it, and showed her the small red capsule. "This will make you sleep, Lucy," he said.

She stared at the thing and shook her head.

"It's this or the gun butt," he threatened.

She accepted the capsule hastily and popped it into her mouth. He watched with amusement the difficulty she had in swallowing it dry. He probed inside of her mouth with his flashlight to make sure.

"You'll go to sleep in a few minutes," he said, "and I'll see you in the morning. But I won't be far away in the meantime. If you try to make any noise I'll kill you."

He knew from the look on her face that she believed him. She hadn't given any trouble yet, and wasn't likely to now. She was already too used to obeying him. And he'd been careful to hold out just enough hope to her to get cooperation in return. He could read her. If she behaved perfectly, there might still be a chance. But he laughed inwardly. There was no chance.

He closed the trunk and locked it. Then he opened the garage doors and strolled out into the open air. It was almost dusk, six o'clock by his watch. He smoked a cigarette. Be patient, he told himself. Probably just about now they'd be expecting her home for dinner, James and Lisa and Douglas. The husband would wait maybe half an hour more. Then he'd start calling her friends, the country club. When finally he didn't locate her, he'd call the police. He'd tell them she went shopping, and that

would lead them to the car. Then the hunt would be on. But it would all take time. He would be patient. Tomorrow the real fun would begin.

Half a dozen cigarettes and almost an hour later he unlocked the trunk to look at Lucy. She lay still, breathing deeply. The flashlight shining directly in her eyes failed to disturb her. He was satisfied. She'd keep till morning. He locked the trunk again, locked the garage, and went into the house.

"Where have you been?" his sister asked him without interest.

"Over at Eddie's," he said. He knew several Eddies, and she didn't care anyway. He made himself a sandwich and had a bottle of beer. After that, as he often did, he watched television till past midnight. There were several newscasts, and he was a little disappointed when none of them mentioned Lucille Roth.

He checked the car trunk again before he went to bed. All was well. Be patient, he cautioned himself again. It would be ridiculously easy to kill her now and dump her somewhere. But it would be too easy. Anybody could do it that way.

He went inside and had another bottle of beer. He wasn't a narcotics user. Beer was enough for him. It made him sleep.

He awoke fairly late, almost nine, and had a solitary breakfast because by this time of day he was alone in the house. The portable radio told him the nine o'clock news, which included a brief announcement about a Lucille Roth being missing.

He went out to the garage to see Lucy. He found her only half awake, still groggy from the sedative. And she'd been crying. Her soiled face was tear-stained.

"I'm thirsty," she whispered to him. "Can I have a drink of water?"

"Maybe later," he told her. "I don't want you to be able to scream very loud for a while."

That brought her fully awake quite suddenly. To the half-remembered fears of yesterday, a new one now was added. She questioned mutely.

"I'm going to drive to a certain place," he went on. "You may know where we are when we get there. You may want to scream to attract attention. I can promise you something though. If you do scream they'll never get you out of this trunk alive. I've got a gun, remember." He showed it to her again. "I'll empty it right through the trunk lid. And you'll never know whether they get me or not."

He watched her to calculate the effect of his words. Then he told himself he didn't have to worry. Her answer was written in her face. She didn't want to die just so that he might die too. She wanted to see Lisa and Douglas again. He closed the trunk and locked it.

He opened the garage doors, got into the car, and backed out. Then he headed off in an unfamiliar direction. He drove at a moderate pace and obeyed all traffic signals. No one knew he wasn't driving alone.

He found the Roth house without much difficulty. Once he was in the right street he needn't have known the exact number. Two police cars were in front of the place. He approached slowly, circled the block once, and returned. This second time he rediscovered his nerve. He parked just across the street from the police cars.

There was a cop in one of the cars. This cop looked at the new arrival for a moment, but there was no curiosity in the look. He went back to listening to his radio.

He smiled at the cop's reaction and breathed easier. Then he studied the house. A real nice place, a new ranch type, almost a mansion. Lucy had had things real soft, he thought. A lot softer than that hard trunk floor.

Almost half an hour passed without visible activity. There were cops in the house, of course. They would be questioning James Roth. Is there anyplace, Mr. Roth, that your wife might have gone that you haven't mentioned yet? Was your wife in good physical health? Did anything seem wrong with her mentally? Did she have any enemies?

It was all very funny.

He got out of his own car finally and strolled over to the police car. The cop in it instantly became a little more alert. But not a lot more.

"What can I do for you, buddy?" he wanted to know, not unfriendly.

"This is the Roth home, isn't it? I heard on the radio that Mrs. Roth is missing."

"That's right. Do you know anything about it?"

"Oh, no."

"What do you want then?"

"Just curious."

"You a friend of the Roths?"

"Don't know 'em."

"Why are you so curious then?"

"I'm a student of criminology."

The cop seemed amused. "You think there's been a crime?" he asked.

"Probably. Rich people. Things always happen to rich people. You don't mind if I hang around, do you?"

"No, I guess there's no law against it."

So he hung around. This particular cop wasn't very talkative though. The radio chatter wasn't very interesting either. He got tired of it quickly and went back and sat in his own car.

Another car drove up while he waited. A man got out of it and went into the house. He looked like a reporter. Within fifteen minutes still another car arrived. One of its occupants went into the house while the second snapped a picture of the house itself. The caption under that picture, when it appeared in the afternoon paper, would undoubtedly read, "This is the palatial residence of Mr. and Mrs. James Roth, from which Mrs. Roth disappeared sometime Tuesday."

Both the reporters came out after a while and they and the photographer drove away. It was too bad, because they just missed another good picture. The red hardtop came down the street and swung into the driveway. It had scarcely braked to a complete stop when four more men came out of the house.

As he sat watching, he realized with a sudden thrill that one of these four must be James Roth—the big, bare-headed, shirt-sleeved man. The other men seemed to be asking him questions about the car and he kept nodding. Yes, this is my wife's car. But where is my wife? Where is Lucy? And then this James Roth seemed to lean against the car and put his forehead down on the roof of it. Even from a distance one could see his shoulders were shaking.

"I love my husband," Lucy had said. Well, Lucy, maybe your husband likes you too. That's something to live for, isn't it? Too bad.

The other men led James Roth back inside the house, and the red hardtop stood there all alone. The cop in the parked cruiser listened to the radio. The newspapermen were probably thinking about what they were going to put in the afternoon editions.

He had lunch at a drive-in restaurant. He had two hamburgers and a chocolate milkshake. He ate them in the car. On the way back to the Roth home, he stopped at a filling station and bought a few gallons of gasoline, regular grade.

"Hear about the rich dame that got lost?" he asked the attendant.

The man stood with one foot on the rear bumper while he pumped gas. "Mrs. Roth?" he said. "Yeah, she used to stop in here. Nice-looking gal. They won't ever find her alive."

Can you hear that, Lucy? Recognize the man's voice? Why don't you call to him, let him know you're in there? Because you know what I'll do if you make any noise, don't you?

He gave the attendant the money and drove away, and out of the man's hearing he laughed. He felt warm inside. There was a pleasurable tingling in his blood. There'd been the danger, the horrible danger, because you never know what a woman will do. Now there was the immense, wonderful relief. He didn't know which feeling he liked better. But this was the real thing. This was living.

When he got back to the Roth home, he didn't hesitate. No driving once around the block. The police cars were still there, but this time he pulled up boldly just opposite them and parked.

He got out and walked over to them. There was the same policeman he'd talked to that morning, and there was another one, a sergeant with three stripes on his sleeve.

"What's new?" he asked.

"Who are you?" the sergeant wanted to know.

The other policeman supplied that information. "He was hanging around here all morning. He's a criminology student."

Both the cops laughed. Finally the sergeant said. "Well, maybe we need a criminologist. We're not getting anywhere."

"You haven't found Mrs. Roth?"

The sergeant shook his head.

"Any clues?"

"Not yet. This one's going to be a real doozie. She left her car in the parking lot and went into the store. At least two clerks remember waiting on her. And they saw her leave the store. Nobody saw her after that."

Right then somehow he knew exactly how he wanted to do it. This sergeant seemed willing to talk. It was just a matter of making him say the right things at the right time.

"This sounds very interesting, Sergeant," he said. "Do you mind if I get my notebook and write some things down? And I'd like to know if you have any theories on the case."

The sergeant looked properly flattered. "Sure thing," he agreed.

He hurried back to his car and delved into the littered glove compartment. There was a notebook there that he used for his horse bets. He found it now and a pencil too. But he didn't return to the sergeant. Instead he went back and stood at the rear of the car, just a couple of feet from Lucy, and made a show of looking at the Roth house and jotting something down.

Come over here, Sergeant, he said to himself over and over. Come over here, because I want Lucy to hear all of this.

And that's the way it happened. For a minute or so the sergeant seemed puzzled by his behavior, but then, partly because he didn't have anything else to do, he came over.

"Now, what was it you wanted to know, buddy?" he asked.

"Oh—yes—by the way, can I have your name, Sergeant?"

"Hallock."

"Pardon me?" He made just the smallest pretense of not being able to hear too well.

"Sergeant Hallock," the sergeant said more loudly, and spelled it.

"Have you been officially assigned to the Roth case, Sergeant Hallock?"

"Yes, temporarily. I'm working with Lieutenant Johns."

He wrote all this down faithfully. "Sergeant, is there anything at all peculiar about this case?"

"Well, the peculiar thing is that we haven't any leads."

"You don't know why Mrs. Roth disappeared?"

"Well, she either disappeared voluntarily or she was kidnapped. Since there doesn't seem to be any good reason why she should walk off on her own, we're assuming she was kidnapped."

"Why?"

"Well, the family's well off. Maybe she's being held for ransom. But we haven't heard from the kidnapper yet. So maybe it was just robbery."

"If it was robbery though, Sergeant, why hasn't Mrs. Roth come back?"

"Don't you ever read the papers, boy?" The sergeant heaved a massive sigh. "That kind of robbery is usually complicated. The victim gets a good look at the criminal for later identification. Then, to prevent later identification, the criminal gets rid of the victim."

"Murder?"

"Sure. And if that happens, the body usually isn't found for a few days."

"Sergeant, would there be any other possible motive for the kidnapping?"

"Oh, out-and-out murder, I suppose. But Roth says his wife had no enemies."

"Any other motive?"

The sergeant put one sizable shoe up on the rear bumper and thought. "Oh, I guess anything's possible. There are just so many logical reasons for something like this. But maybe there are lots of illogical reasons. I mean reasons that nobody ever thought of till some particular guy gets some screwy idea, and then that's his reason. And it's a new reason. That's what makes it hard for us sometimes."

"That's very interesting, Sergeant," he said, writing. Inside he felt very proud. Was this an absolutely new reason for kidnapping a woman?

After a while, he said, "Sergeant, how is Mr. Roth taking all this?"

"Pretty bad. I just saw him in the house there. He's kind of broken up, I'd say. I got the impression he's pretty much in love with Lucy."

"Lucy?"

"Yeah, Mrs. Roth. Name's Lucille, but he called her Lucy."

"Uh-huh." He made a note of it.

And now came the really big moment. The big trial for Lucy, and the big one for himself too. He swallowed before he could make himself ask the question.

"How are the kids taking it?"

Sergeant Hallock grimaced and his jaw hardened a little. "That's the worst part of it," he said. "They're a couple of real nice kids. At first they tried to keep the news from 'em. You know, Mummy's over to Aunt Ethel's, or something like that. But that kind of thing works just so long. Should have got the kids out of the house entirely. But I guess Roth didn't think of it. Thought his wife would show up any minute. And now it's too late. The kids saw the shape their father is in. And it's hard to fool kids anyway. I think they realize by now that something's happened to their mother. They keep wanting to know where she is and when she's coming back. They asked me, even. They'd been sent to their room to keep 'em out of the way, I guess, and I was standing in the front hall while the lieutenant was in the kitchen with Roth. Well, those kids sneaked out, and they asked me, 'Policeman, will you find our Mummy for us?' There were tears in their eyes too, you know? I tell you, I had to get out of that place."

There was silence for a long moment while the sergeant rubbed his nose with a nervous forefinger and looked away. A silence all around, a silence where the slightest word or sound would come like thunder.

This was it. He knew that. He put a hand into his coat pocket and fingered the gun, the gun that made a bulge the sergeant had never noticed. But the gun was there.

Well, Lucy? What are you going to do? One little word, Lucy, and we're both dead. I'll kill you and this cop will probably kill me because he'll think I'm shooting at him. But I'll be shooting at you, Lucy. Do you want to take the chance? Look at the chance I'm taking, Lucy. I like taking chances. What about you? You heard what the man said. We're right in front of your house and your kids are in the house and they're crying for you. Well, Lucy?

"What's the matter with you, buddy?" the sergeant asked suddenly.

"What do you mean?"

"You look white as a sheet. Something wrong?"

"It was you talking about those kids, I guess."

"Sure, I know what you mean."

He found himself suddenly weak, and he had to lean against the side of the car for support. He heard the sergeant talking but he didn't know what he was saying. Groping, he opened a door and climbed inside. He was afraid he was going to faint.

But he didn't. He pulled away from the curb leaving the sergeant standing looking at him, muttering something about "these criminologists."

He drove slowly for a while and gradually he felt what he'd done. He'd taken the biggest risk he knew how to take and he'd won. He'd taken it to them and driven off with it, leaving them standing there. Hey, cops! he thought. Guess what I've got in the trunk of my car! He was supremely happy.

It was close to midnight when he got home. He'd driven around aimlessly for a while and then had had dinner at another drive-in restaurant. Finally he'd watched a double-feature at a drive-in movie. He didn't worry about Lucy at all. If she'd kept her mouth shut in front of her own house with a cop standing right next to the car, she wasn't going to give him any trouble anywhere else.

He shot the car into the driveway, past the garage doors that he always

kept open. Then he got out, locked the garage doors, and went into the house through the back.

In the living room were his sister, his brother-in-law, and two cops.

"That's the guy," Sergeant Hallock said.

He was too surprised to be frightened. "Sure, I'm the guy you talked to this afternoon," he said, rather foolishly.

"We'd like to have another look at your car," Hallock said.

He stared at them stupidly. This couldn't be happening, he told himself. He felt the weight of the gun still in his pocket. He could reach for it, shoot it out with them, one against two. He wasn't a coward, he'd proved that this afternoon. But he didn't do it.

"How did you find me, Sergeant?" he asked. He was alert now, and genuinely curious.

"When I decided I wanted to find you, I realized I remembered your license number. I guess I've got an automatic memory for those things. And I was standing right by it."

"Yes." It was funny again, somehow. "You were standing right by it, Sergeant. Well, come out to the garage. I'll show you."

He led them out and opened the garage doors and then the trunk for them. And he laughed out loud when they gasped at what they found in there.

He was still laughing when they handcuffed him and took his gun away and led him to the police car while the sergeant radioed to headquarters.

"Yeah, Mrs. Roth," Sergeant Hallock said into the microphone. "She's alive. She just gouged her wrist with a piece of glass. Pocketbook mirror—broke it into slivers. And then she let the blood drip through the air holes this guy had drilled into the floor of the trunk. I saw the blood on the street when he drove away."

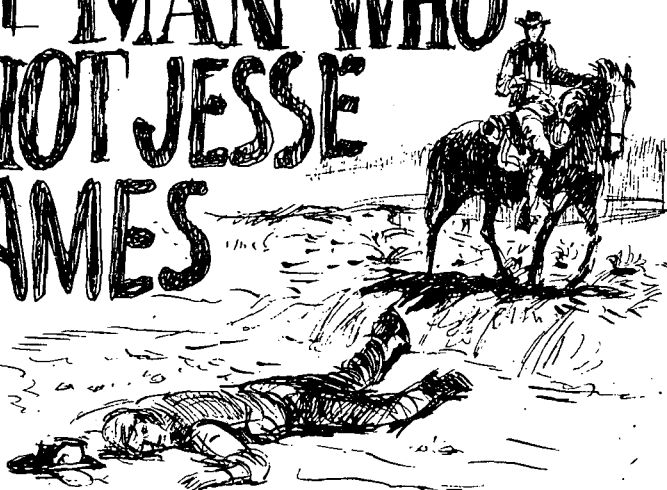
It was then that he interrupted the sergeant and grabbed the mike, handcuffs and all, and shouted the most important part. "The guy that did this had real nerve! Put her in the trunk and drove right up in front of the house and talked with the cops! A cop was standing with his foot right up on the back bumper of the car! He was right there beside her all the time!"

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Bob Ford had a good case of the spooks . . .



THE MAN WHO SHOT JESSE JAMES



by **THEODORE MATHIESON**

I was just a footloose cowpuncher of twenty-five in that year of 1887 when, having decided to mosey south from Montana down Santa Fe way, on the lookout for new prospects, I ran across the man lying half dead on the bank of a dry creek in southern Colorado:

He was fairly young, maybe around my age, but dehydrated and almost gone from starvation. I figured he had wandered away from his camp—which I learned later was true—because he had no horse or gear,

and the rifle that lay beside him had been emptied. As if that wasn't enough to mark him for a tenderfoot, he had overlooked the spring a ways down the dry creek where a swarm of bees were advertising water like a tent-show spieler.

So, laying aside the shotgun I always carried with me, I got some water into him and after a while some boiled jerky and coffee. He began to squirm around a little and pretty soon he had enough spunk to get delirious and start shouting, "I killed him! I just shot Jesse James! Jesse James is dead!"

Well, I guessed right off that I'd found Bob Ford, the guy who shot old Jesse five years back, and my first impulse was to light a shuck and let him take care of his own self. Not that I considered Jesse a saint, though a lot of people did; Jesse was a killer through and through, but I didn't cotton to a back-shooter. At the same time, I was kind of curious, so I stuck with the nursing, and pretty soon the guy came out of it and asked me who I was.

I told him I was Ed Kelly from Butte, and asked him if he was Bob Ford. He looked surprised and admitted he was, and then I guess he saw the unfriendly look in my eyes, because he grabbed me by the sleeve and said, "Don't leave me, please. You got to hear my side of it before you make up your mind about me. I've paid for what I did, God knows. If I had it to do over—"

"Maybe you might have waited until Jesse turned around and given him an even chance?"

"Jesse would have killed me," he said. "I was never very good with a gun—and, believe me, *I really didn't mean to do it!*"

"That's not the way I understood it," I said. "Jesse and you and your brother Charlie had breakfast, then you both went with Jesse into his front room while his wife was in the kitchen and his two kids were playing in the front yard. Jesse stepped up on a chair to straighten a picture on the wall, and you emptied the six bullets from your gun into his back."

"That's true," Ford said, lying weakly back on the ground and looking up at the sky. "As far as it goes. You seem to have the record real straight."

"I ought to. I stayed with a passel of distant cousins of the Younger brothers in Montana a while back. They hate your guts."

"The Younger brothers were part of Jesse's gang long before I joined. it. I hardly knew them. And there's a part of the record you *don't* know. That morning—I got my gun out, and found I couldn't fire it! I realized

I didn't want to kill Jesse. I didn't like him, but I didn't want to kill him. Not even for the reward money. But Charlie, my brother, said, 'Do it, Bob!' That spooked me, and the gun just went off by itself. I swear that's the way it was!"

"It's kinda hard to swallow," I said, half believing him.

"I know. Nobody believes it, so I don't talk about it any more."

"You told *me*."

"You saved my life. I guess I just didn't want you to think you'd gone to all that trouble for an out-and-out skunk."

I waited around until the next morning when Ford was strong enough to stand. Then I put him on my horse and we started out, me walking, for Del Norte on the Rio Grande. I don't know exactly why I bothered, but there was something about the little guy that made me feel sorry for him. I could see he'd been through a lot, and on the trail he told me a little of it.

"I've never told another living soul," he said, "because they'd think I was crazy. But I got this feeling that Jesse's following me."

"Jesse's dead. It might be the Younger brothers."

"They're all in prison. No, it's Jesse I'm scared of. You've heard the stories—that the man I killed wasn't Jesse."

"But you know it was."

"I do and I don't. I know it ain't logical—the coroner was satisfied, and so was his wife. But there's something else I never told anybody. I said at the inquest that Jesse didn't say a word when I shot him. But he did."

"Why are you telling me this?"

"I don't know. Maybe you're the only man I've been able to trust since—since the shooting."

"Well, what did Jesse say?"

"He turned his head and said, '*Bob, I'm not—*'"

"I'm not what?"

"That's all he said, then he was dead. But after a while—when I heard the rumors about the man I shot not being Jesse, that the real Jesse had gone to Mexico—I got to thinking. What if he was trying to tell me he wasn't who we thought he was? That he was an impostor? And I got to looking behind me every time I went outside, afraid I'd see Jesse there with his guns out. It's gone on like that for the last few years. It's got so I'm afraid of my own shadow. That's why I was camping out in the hills,

where nobody knew where I was. And lately I've been dreaming about him."

"Look," I said, "you've got yourself a case of the spooks. Why don't you change your name, go somewhere and start over, forget about it?"

"I can't forget. My own brother Charlie heard Jesse's words too. They say Charlie shot his own head off because of some woman, but I know different. The night before he killed himself, he told me he'd seen Jesse on the street outside his hotel."

"I'd say he had the spooks too."

"Maybe. But why do I always feel that Jesse's just behind me?"

We arrived in Del Norte at mid-morning, and I helped Ford down in front of the hotel. I asked him how he was doing for cash. He said he had plenty and took out a fifty-dollar bill and tried to put it in my hand.

"I know you're thankful without that," I said, and wanting somehow to make him feel better, I put out my hand for a shake.

He smiled, then his face turned white and his eyes got as big as nickels.

"What's the matter?" I asked, afraid he was going to faint on me.

"Your hand! The tip of your middle finger is missing!"

"What of it? My brother chopped it off when I was a kid. He was splitting kindling and I got too close."

"Jesse had the tip of his middle finger missing. Shot it off while he was cleaning a gun. But it was missing from his left hand. Your tip is gone from the right." He was studying my face with his piercing brown eyes. "You look a little like him, Ed," he said. "Like Jesse."

"Well, I'm not. And if the corpse of the man you shot had the tip of the finger on his left hand gone, you have nothing to worry about."

"He did," Ford said.

I wandered down to New Mexico that summer and worked a couple of years breaking horses for an outfit near Bernalillo before I got the yen to go on the prod again, this time ending up at Silver City for a six-month stint, then on to Tucumcari and Alamogordo. I guess it was close to four years before I got back to Colorado again. I didn't feel any older, but I'd filled out some and grown a beard, and I still carried my shotgun, a practice that was getting unpopular in the cities, though it was still tolerated in the boondocks.

As I passed through Del Rio, I remembered Bob Ford and wondered

how he was doing. I stopped and asked the postmaster if he lived anywhere around there. He said no, but that if I was asking about the Bob Ford who killed Jesse James, he would have been long since run out of town.

Ford was a pariah, there was no doubt about it, and I hoped for his sake that he'd taken my advice and changed his name.

When I got to Creede, which was booming with the silver rush, I registered at the hotel. After I'd washed up, I went and got myself a good meal at the restaurant next door. Afterwards, lighting up a cigar, I went out walking to see the town. Like always, I carried my shotgun.

I wanted to get back to Montana by a shortcut over the pass near San Luis Peak. But, since it was early June, I wasn't sure if the pass would be clear of snow, and the way to find out such things—and, in fact, about anything of local importance—was to ask a bartender. I picked out a saloon that seemed to be doing a land-office business, and went in to ask my question.

A red-faced guy in a checked suit I pegged at once for a drummer staggered into me as I entered through the batwings and started apologizing with alcoholic profuseness.

"Newcomer in town?" he bellowed, causing heads to turn.

"Just passing through."

"Like the rest of us. Belly up, friend. Old Ed's got the cure for everything!"

"Old Ed?"

"Old Ed Kelly!" He pointed toward the bar, where the bartender stood at the cash drawer with his back to us. "Great guy, Ed. He owns the joint. Tell him Smitty sent you!" And, laughing at his joke, he staggered out into the night.

Old Ed Kelly?

Curious to see the man who had the same name I did, and half suspecting the truth, I ambled over to the bar. Sure enough, there was Bob Ford, counting his money with his back to me. I recognized his face in the mirror. But he'd grown fatter and a lot greyer and looked as if he'd known too much good living. I watched him shuffle the cash, and I guess I was a bit sore at his using my name because when I spoke I think my tone had an edge to it.

"*Old Ed Kelly*," I said. "You sure look like somebody I used to know."

He looked up from the green stuff.

As our eyes met, I reached up and took off my hat so he'd recognize me.

But he didn't. What he did do was reach suddenly into the cash drawer, pull out a Colt double-action Army as big as a barn, spin around toward me, and start shooting. The first shot nicked my ear, the second fanned my cheek, and I remember thinking that when Bob Ford said he was a lousy shot he wasn't kidding.

By that time, though, I'd brought up my shotgun and, with one blast, shot his face off.

"Self-defense—self-defense!" a high-pitched voice yelled. Another voice, heavy with authority, said, "Everybody stand right where you are."

It was the sheriff of Creede, and as he walked up to me he said, "Lucky I saw that, youngster. Now, why would old Ed want to shoot holes into you?"

I saw no point in lying. I said, "His name isn't Ed Kelly. That's my name. He was using it as an alias. His real name is Bob Ford."

"Ford? The killer of Jesse James? Here in Creede?"

"The same."

And I told him how I'd met Ford on the dry creek and something of what he'd told me.

I'd no sooner finished when a guy who looked familiar stepped out of the crowd. The minute I saw that bobbing Adam's apple I knew it was Ed Hooley, who grew up in the same Montana town I did.

"Ed! Ed Kelly!" he said, pumping my hand. "Did I hear you say that was Bob Ford you just killed?"

"That's right," I said.

"Well now, that'll make them relatives of yours mighty happy, won't it?"

"What relatives is he talkin' about?" the sheriff asked me suspiciously.

"The Younger brothers," I said. "I'm distantly related to Jim, Bob, Cole, and John, who rode with Jesse before the Pinkertons got them. I never had anything against Bob Ford though, although some of my cousins did."

"Now, isn't that a coincidence?" the sheriff said nastily. But I knew, and he knew, that he couldn't do anything about it.

So, you see, history books to the contrary, the fact that I was Ed Kelly

and a distant cousin of the Younger brothers had nothing to do with my killing Bob Ford.

I know he hadn't recognized me. With my new beard and older look, I guess I just looked *familiar*, and that was enough to spark Ford's old fear that Jesse was following him and had finally caught up with him.

That, and the fact that facing the bar mirror when he saw me raise my hat he thought my short finger was on my left hand, the same as Jesse's. Had he been facing me, he wouldn't have panicked and we might have ended up having a friendly drink together.



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Hindsight is a wonderful thing . . .

PROMO KILL

by JEFFRY SCOTT



For a walking corpse, Walter Gastart was in great shape.

His pupils were nearly the right size and the eyes themselves were willing to focus, often even in the right direction. His elegant hands were lightly clasped around an upraised knee—he had one foot on the coffee table—and were thus unable to tremble. Call it a triumph of art over nature.

I suppose he was even an imposing figure, as they say. A popular idol

of a small kind, dating rapidly, which often translates into reality as a grand variety of stuffed dummy.

We were one hour and five minutes into the press conference at the Alexandria Hotel, and none of the show-biz columnists had started pointing at him or muttering among themselves. My stomach fluttered with triumph—or perhaps indigestion. No doubt Christians experienced the same ambiguous stirring as they tiptoed across the gory sand of some arena while the snoring of lions drowned their crunching footsteps.

Wally Gastart, thespian, TV star, and Grade-A sphincter, seemed to be getting away with it. When I'd arrived at his suite three hours previously, he had been hopelessly, vilely drunk.

Now he was on show, producing fairly long sentences with words in the correct order.

The Presidential Suite was helping us, of course. The last surviving antique part of the hotel, it was a lofty, gloomy vault with tall, narrow windows, heavily draped. So it didn't seem odd for a few lights to be on.

I'd enthroned Walter Gastart in an alcove at one end, arranged on a century-old chaise longue, which he was using as a king-size armchair. His makeup was more discreet than that of any woman in the room. Nobody realized that the alcove was as cunningly lit as a miniature stage. The total result was that Wally looked good.

Mercifully, the opposition wasn't first-rank. Gastart was on the final stage of a ten-state, fifteen-city promotional tour for his series, "PowerMan," which had been running for five years and wasn't feeling at all well. Double Mountain wasn't that much of a city, but then "PowerMan" wasn't that much of a series—and Wally Gastart certainly wasn't that much of a human being.

The journalists facing him wrote TV or general-entertainment columns but I suspected that several also looked after livestock prices or chased ambulances. They were either very young and bright but naïve and still liable to be star-struck, or elderly and cozy, veterans of other, tougher fields who were delighted to be put out to grass on the easier stuff.

Like so many performers, Gastart's best acting took place offstage. For a person seething with insecurity, arrogance, and snobbery, he was shooting for an Oscar as a mellow, understanding, wryly self-mocking fellow. He'd won them over within minutes, even managing to work a faint suggestion of the local burr into his normal speech pattern.

All the usual questions had been asked. How does PowerMan catch

bullets in his hand? What sort of girl did Wally hope to marry? (I'd tensed at that one, asked of a forty-two-year-old dedicated bachelor, but there was no edge to it.) Had he really written several episodes of the show? Would PowerMan's famous pacemaker ever fail, causing him to die on screen?

After the wet-palmed opening movements, I'd relaxed a trifle and hardly listened to the answers. After all, I'd coached him in them and in his replies to far tougher queries. Key words kept surfacing: challenge, satisfaction, morality, example. And phrases like "really want to take a shot at directing" and "if you'd told this old Shakespearean warrior ten years ago that—"

Glancing across the room, I spotted Pete Bandeau leaning against the end wall, managing to transform that corner into a street scene. He was wearing a good but not expensive dark suit, white shirt, and black tie that could be topped by a chauffeur's cap or get him into a superior restaurant. But somehow the sedate clothes might just as well have been dirty jeans and a leather jacket with a switchblade tucked just out of sight.

Bandeau was Wally's driver, factotum, valet, and general creature. He'd turned up at Gastart's suite on my heels that morning. Together we'd subjected Wally to an icy, needle-sharp shower, walked him round and round, and administered massive transfusions of black coffee.

Pete Bandeau yawned at me and looked away. We worked together, but there was no question of our being allies. If anything, he resented me finding his boss at a disadvantage. Pete rather prided himself on catching Walter Gastart's errors almost before and at least as soon as they were made.

Now his sullen face was stony. I wondered if anybody else detected a family resemblance or whether I saw it only because I knew the truth. Gastart's patrician features were parodied by Pete Bandeau's as a big nose and a general impression of being roughly hacked out of rock; they were brothers.

It wasn't exactly a secret, but obviously Gastart didn't brag about it. I'd put two and two together after handling his passport on an overseas promo tour. Walter Bandeau Gastart, it said. A piquant master-and-servant relationship—for Pete was the elder brother.

The big double doors at the far end of the suite creaked open and a girl hurried in.

All my anxiety muscles clenched.

She was small and stocky, her lipstick and eyeshadow heavy yet careless, put on more out of habit than for decoration. There was a nasty bruise on her right cheekbone. Her dark hair was pulled back and caught with a rubber band.

Utterly uncaring about arriving as the rest were about to leave, she marched to the front of the group and took a spindly gilt chair. The other journalists exchanged glances; there were a few skyward-rolled eyes and grimaces. They knew the lady, and they didn't like her.

The local doyen, a balding man in a woolly suit, cleared his throat apologetically. "Susie Stein, *Double Mountain Consumergram*." He gave her a sideways glance. "It's a giveaway journal," he added bitchily, winning some sniggers.

There might have been an awkward pause, but I'm not in the awkward-pause business.

"Glad to have you with us, Ms. Stein—Susie," I said, and you'd have sworn I meant it.

Ignoring me, she flipped open a spiral-bound notebook with a gesture like a declaration of war.

"Sex," she announced. Her glare at Wally Gastart could have taken the paint off a door. "What's your attitude?"

For the first time in years I was proud of him. "Hey, where would we all be without it?" he parried, addressing the others, his bosom buddies of seventy minutes' duration. We'd offered a continental breakfast before the conference started, but most of the scribes had opted for hard liquor and I'd ordered the waiters to keep their glasses full. Wally's flippancy tickled them.

"I don't think we need that kind of stuff," the doyen reproved her as the laughter tailed off.

Susie Stein stared at her notebook. "I asked a question."

Wally opened his mouth. I knew he was about to hit her with something tacky and stale, like "Well, if you mean sex before marriage, I'm in favor as long as it doesn't delay the wedding."

Dropping a casual hand on his shoulder I said, "Look, folks, we have a plane to catch this morning. Susie, I'm sorry, but we've been at this for more than an hour."

The others started getting to their feet. Wally's hand was pumped to a babble of thanks and farewells. Pete Bandeau might be sulky but he registered my high-sign and began shepherding them out.

I crossed to Susie Stein's chair. She looked up at me, her heavy jaw set. It was one hell of a bruise, I saw now, with a cross-hatching of abrasions on the cheekbone. As the double doors closed behind the last of her colleagues, she said, "You'd better give me some answers. Otherwise Mr. Big-Star Gastart won't fly anywhere but to jail."

The only good part about Susie's bombshell was that it came out more as a bargaining point than as a threat. Close up, I could see she was young—to me, under thirty is dewy-fresh—and dangerously easy to spook.

She wanted something—and she knew something. Walter Gastart simply sat there, staring out over our heads. "Let's move this to more civilized surroundings," I suggested. The waiters had started clearing glasses and rearranging chairs, and they had ears.

Susie shrugged ungraciously, wincing as the collar of her trenchcoat brushed the bruise. "I don't care just as long as we settle this. Who am I talking to anyway?"

"Sid Martell, Susie. Media consultant to Tom-Tom Independent Productions—but just think of me as your friendly neighborhood flack."

She didn't smile. "Gastart may not want you in on this. It's between him and me."

"Like hell." Wally heaved himself up and swayed over to us. "I've never set eyes on you, girl."

"Maybe not—it was dark. But you sure set fists on me."

All my career, if it can be dignified with that label, has been about lies—incoming and outgoing. White lies, gentle polishings of the facts, outright fables, scurrilous rumor, name it. I would swear Susie was telling the truth.

Her sincerity shook Walter Gastart. "I've never seen you," he repeated plaintively. He tugged at my sleeve. "Sid, do something about this. It must be the old badger game, something like that."

Susie Stein went red, or rather redder. "Ever the silver-tongued diplomatist," I put in hastily. "Let's go upstairs."

It was a silent journey up in the elevator. The conference had drained Wally and he moved like an old man, falling onto my bed as soon as we reached the room. It made me feel a little better just closing the door behind our happy little trio.

Susie paused and took a deep breath. I felt sorry for the kid. I meet

scores of Susie Steins—dedicated in their own wacky way, vulnerable, all wanting to be Jane Fonda in *The China Syndrome*.

"I came here last night," she told me. "I wanted an interview with him. Sure, I knew about the conference, but that would be pure zilch. I wanted better. So I took a gamble."

Wally had crossed his hands on his chest and his prow of a nose was pointed at the ceiling. I went to Westminster Abbey once, and he put me in mind of a stone knight on the lid of a tomb.

He could be asleep or conducting what lawyers call a listening brief. "What time was that?" I asked her.

"About two this morning." And she blushed so that the rest of her cheek matched the raw place.

"I think that ends our business," I said. "The desk had strict orders not to admit any visitors to Mr. Gastart after midnight. And none at *any* time without checking through me. Wally—Walter—turned in soon after midnight."

She shook her head. "You can make the rules, Martell, but there's no law says I have to keep them. The night manager's a friend of mine. Coming here was just an impulse. I work part time at the radio station. My own show."

That didn't impress me, and she went on, a shade irritably. "I was driving past and remembered about Walter Gastart being here. I parked, came in, and had a drink with the night manager. He said your star here was still up, making a string of phone calls to the Coast. It's a big deal for the Alexandria, having Gastart here, and my friend was bragging.

"Anyway, I said goodnight, pretended to leave, then sneaked up in a service elevator. The night manager's office is on the second floor. Security let me in to see him, and when I left him he assumed I'd go straight out."

I was replaying the previous night's events in my head. We'd flown in at 8:00 P.M. and had dinner in Gastart's suite while I briefed him on likely and unlikely questions and the party line to take on them. I'd fed him the names of the main journalists who'd be present—especially a couple he'd met the previous year when they'd been part of a massive press tour of Tom-Tom's studio complex in L.A. When he saw them, he'd remember them—or appear to—and that would be a help.

Pete Bandeau had eaten with us, laid out Gastart's clothes, and ran a bath for him while we talked. The briefing was over by 11:30 and I'd left

after a private word with Bandeau. Wally Gastart had a trick of slipping away during these tours, looking for what we'll call social contact. In the bigger cities it was no problem, but he'd stick out like a sore thumb in Double Mountain.

Assuring me he'd keep an eye on Wally until he'd taken a sleeping pill, Pete let me out of the suite and I put myself away for the night with a crossword-puzzle book.

But I couldn't be sure what had happened once I'd left the suite. Pete Bandeau said he'd gone to his more modest hotel down the block, leaving Wally drowsing in his pajamas, lying on top of the covers. Sometime between Pete's departure and my turning up the next morning, Wally had taken on a real load though.

Reading my uneasy expression, Ms. Stein grew more confident. "I located the suite and tapped at the door—not very loud," she admitted. "There was no answer, so I slipped in, figuring he'd find it harder to throw me out if I could only get myself established inside.

"The place was dark and I couldn't find a light switch. But the bedroom door was open and I could hear him on the phone. Apparently he'd missed a digit and reached the wrong person in Los Angeles. He was explaining and apologizing for waking them."

Walter Gastart had one eye open. His long fingers were stroking his prematurely grey blow-dried hair as he listened.

Aware of his attention, Susie's voice trembled. "I called out, 'Mr. Gastart?' He hung up—I heard it—and he rushed out and grabbed me, twisted my arm up behind my back, ran me clear across the suite, and shoved me out so hard I lost my balance and hit my face on the far wall of the corridor.

"He locked the door. The breath was out of me but I was mad. I banged and tried to shout, to tell him to open up. But I wasn't supposed to be there, and my face hurt. I finally went home."

Darting a look at Gastart, she added, "He didn't just rough me up, he assaulted me." Defiantly, she explained hoarsely, "If you must know, he grabbed my bottom."

It was bad, all right. So bad I made my face extra uncaring. I hated to do it but I said, "Well dear, it was a nice try. You want an exclusive, so you try a little blackmail. It won't work though. Face it, the hotel won't admit their security is so lousy you could walk in on a VIP who's left orders not to be disturbed. And if your night-manager friend likes

his job and hopes for a promotion *he* won't admit he didn't see you off the premises last night.

"It's our word against yours. And we say it didn't happen."

Susie Stein didn't falter. She examined me as if I was something small and obnoxious and very much out of place in her salad. "I thought you'd take that line. But I've got a witness, Martell.

"Once my friend said Gastart was still awake in his suite, I used a house phone on the third floor and got Lemmy out of bed, in the staff wing. He's the hotel photographer as well as my boy friend."

She had far too many friends in the Alexandria, I decided bitterly.

"I thought that if Gastart agreed to an interview he might agree to pictures as well. Lemmy waited down the corridor, just in case. I didn't want to barrel straight in with him. Lemmy heard me cry out and come out. So it's *not* just my word against yours."

"Yikes!" I said, with my very best crumpled-charm grin.

Susie nodded grimly. "You could say that. Now I'm sick of talking to the monkey. I want to hear from the organ grinder."

Keeping my temper, I advised, "Learn to win graciously, Susie. Not that you've won *anything*. You could have thrown *yourself* out of that door for the sake of getting a beat on a self-made scandal."

"*Mea culpa.*"

The words startled both of us.

Walter Gastart swung his feet off the bed. "You've got me bang to rights, sweetheart."

"Shut up, Wally."

Waving my warning aside, he said, "Susie, I drank not wisely but too well last night. You found me at a bad time for both of us. I've got this hangup about privacy. So, yes, I bundled you out and took a liberty, for which I'm sincerely penitent."

His blue eyes danced professionally. "It was a case of unbearable temptation," he told her. Susie shifted awkwardly in the chair, half embarrassed, half flattered.

"What do you want?" I demanded of her before he could commit himself any further.

"I could sue and get a lot of publicity," she said. "I could write something sensational for the scandal sheets. But what I really want is a frank, in-depth interview, with a lot of stuff you've never said before, Mr. Gastart. We're going to sit here for as long as it takes, *without* your

mouthpiece shutting you up, and you're going to unburden your soul as never before."

"In return for which you forget all about this crazy story of yours," I snapped.

"Naturally," she agreed wearily. "Take a walk, Martell. Please?"

Walter Gastart met my eyes. "Grand idea, Sid. It'll be O.K., m' boy." He looked and sounded pretty jaunty. Triumphant, in a weird way. Reminding me that this entire incident was off-center. But I went out, closing the door with great control so as not to slam it off the hinges.

Pete Bandeau was hurrying up the corridor, a newspaper flapping in his right hand. He pulled up at the sight of me. "Did you get rid of the broad? Is Wally all right?" I had an idea it wasn't what he was bursting to say.

"He's with her right now, Pete. Stay close, but don't interrupt them." I grinned sourly. "Unless she screams."

These things are never neat. There was a lot of stuff between what happened that night at the Alexandria and my making sense of it.

A month after the end of the promo tour, that novel most flacks have in the middle drawer came out of it, found a publisher, became a book-club selection, and earned a lot of money for a film that never actually got made.

I stopped working for Tom-Tom, wrote two more books that brought me half as much reward but twice the satisfaction, remarried an ex-wife, and was happy.

"PowerMan" was dropped in mid-season and Walter Gastart stopped hitting the sauce and began battering it suicidally. Pete Bandeau struck out on his own and opened a bar-cum-disco in Queens, New York.

Neither of those events was anything to do with me, but I kept wondering. Susie Stein hadn't lied, but, by the same token, what she said had taken place couldn't have.

Walter Gastart, you see, was gay. He might—though it wasn't his style—have physically thrown her out. But never, never, drunk or sober, would he have laid a lustful hand on any girl.

Susie Stein's interview never made *Rolling Stone*, but it did surface in a national magazine. It was pretty good, and Wally did say things he'd never let out previously. I scanned the media for her subsequent bylines but without reward.

So that seemed to be the end of it. Except that it didn't make sense.

About a year after our crisis in Double Mountain, my publishers held a bash in New York. I put on a jacket and tie for the first time in months, went there, signed books, and ate and drank too much.

Afterward, I called a cab and checked out Pete Bandeau's place in Queens. It wasn't a glamorous setup by any means, but Pete seemed relaxed and very much at home behind the bar in jeans and a plaid shirt.

He didn't see me come in. I took my drink to a booth and examined the place. The disco area was roped off and dark. Pete was holding forth to a circle of cronies while the real barman did the work. I figured the place would last another half year, with luck. Pete's vicinity was thick with glasses, no beer mugs among them, and he was doing the buying.

There was a gust of laughter. Pete was doing a Johnny Carson impression, not very well. Then he did Jerry Lewis—but anyone can. Then he did Lloyd Bridges which is tough, unless you're good at pretending to exist underwater. He also did the standard Cagney and an excellent Dustin Hoffman.

Strange. He'd been at the corner of my eye for weeks at a stretch, and apart from knowing him as a sullen, effective member of the entourage I'd had no idea of his other life, his talents, his ability to entertain. A family trait, maybe.

Evidently this unpaid act was a feature of the bar. The regulars were nudging each other with laughter and the ring around Pete grew deeper, one man even leaving his half-full glass to hurry along the bar and squeeze in as Pete Bandeau segued from Art Carney to Richard Burton ordering pastrami on rye. "Do Walter Gastart!" I called.

A glass went spinning. In the sudden silence you could hear liquid plip-plopping on the floor. Bandeau shouldered through the listeners and stood over me.

"Say again, mister?" He made no sign of recognizing me.

I smiled uneasily. "Nothing. You've got a great act." I left some money on the table and got out in a hurry. There was just enough time to check out of the Pierre and catch a late plane, so I did.

Walter Gastart would never have got fresh with a female intruder, but Pete Bandeau was a ladies' man. We'd had trouble now and then when he made passes at studio staffers. If he hadn't been Wally's man, he'd have been barred.

It had to be an alibi. Pete lying on Wally's bed in the darkness, ringing people thousands of miles away, using Wally's voice. Calls that would be logged by the hotel switchboard. Innocent, respectable witnesses ready to swear Wally had phoned them. Get rung in the middle of the night and what's your first move? Right—look at the clock, ask what the hell time they think this is.

Susie Stein had blundered in. Pete acted fast, hustling her out and locking the door before she could realize he wasn't Walter Gastart. He and Walter were the same height and build, and she'd heard that distinctive voice. But, being Pete, he couldn't resist a swift pawing of somebody he'd taken to be a hooker or chambermaid looking for some after-hours bread.

That was why, once his drink-sodden brain kicked into gear, Walter had been so ready to plead guilty. It was a bonus: a witness who would swear she'd encountered him in his suite at two in the morning.

But an alibi for what?

I remembered Pete Bandeau changing course in mid-sentence and the way he'd been flourishing that newspaper.

Now I couldn't leave it alone. I rang the *Double Mountain News* as soon as I got back to my house on the beach, asking if anything sensational had broken on a certain date. I've always kept a diary, and it was simple to find the day and the month we'd been there.

Well, said the librarian, there'd been a fire and two fatal car accidents. Oh, yes, and a murder. A man called Brown, a former bit player who'd come to Double Mountain hoping to open a gay club.

I asked to be switched to the paper's police desk. The reporter there remembered the Brown killing—it was unsolved and he expected it would stay that way.

"Brown was a blackmailer obsessed with raising funds for this club he wanted to open. I guess he pushed too hard. He had a house on that new tract at the edge of town. Somebody went out there and shot him in the head when he opened the door."

We'd taken care that everyone should know that Walter Gastart, a.k.a. PowerMan, was on his way to Double Mountain. Brown must either have known Wally or knew of him, and had phoned and demanded a meeting.

I doubt whether Pete Bandeau had realized he was setting up an alibi for murder. Wally must have spun him a tale and by the time Pete knew

the truth it was too late. Bandeau was tough, but not stupid, and the idea of getting involved in a killing would spook him.

That was why he'd been rushing to confront Wally when he encountered me in the corridor—he'd just read of Brown's murder. Recalling the guilty way he'd slipped the newspaper behind his back, I felt sure of it. Hindsight is a wonderful thing.

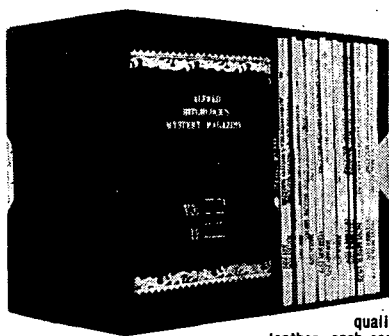
The crime reporter repeated a question.

"No, I haven't got a new line on the killing," I lied. "I just thought there might be a book in it." I thanked him and hung up.

The book had been written and finished several days before I went to New York and saw Pete Bandeau's party piece. Unoriginal to the last, poor wretch, Walter Gastart had booked into the Beverly Hilton and OD'd on barbiturates.

I thought about him, and dead blackmailer Brown, and Susie Stein soaring to obscurity, and Pete Bandeau heading for bankruptcy, and wondered why I had bothered to untangle the mess.

Actually, I know why. It wasn't a morbid streak, or a desire to prove myself a detective. But I had been a minor character in that book—and even a minor character has a right to know the plot.



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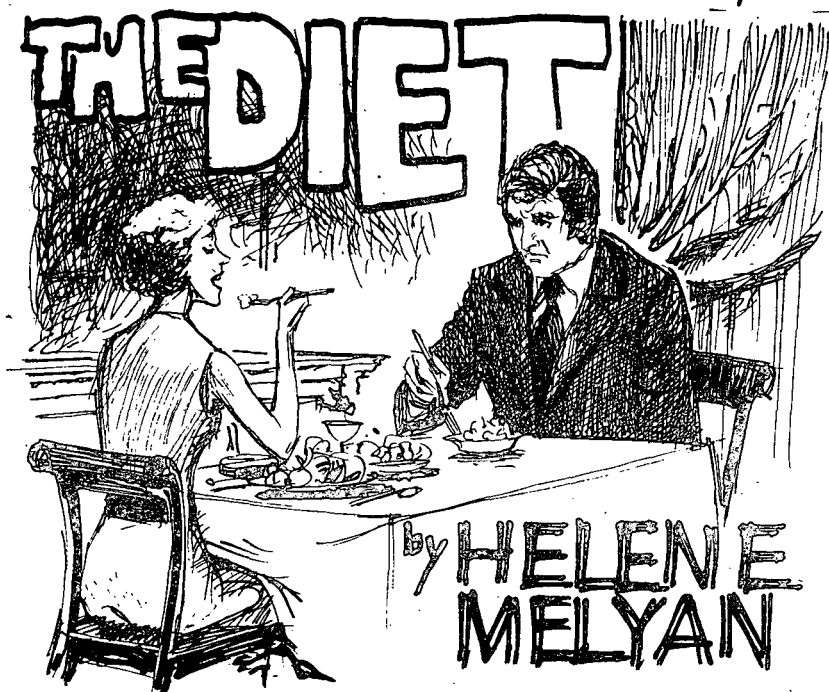
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On Dr. Watkins' diet, Grace said, you could live to be a hundred . . .

THE DIET



This is a fine restaurant, the finest in town, and I find it odd that I can't remember the name. Chez something, perhaps. I've been here before, many times, endless times. It will come to me. It always does. All I need is my steak, my potatoes, my mushrooms broiled in butter. The waitress will bring them at any moment and then my mind will clear.

In other ways, my mind is as sharp as ever, my memory faultless. For example, I remember the moment four years ago when Dr. Watkins told

Grace of my urgent need for a low-cholesterol, low-fat diet, and the way her thin face shone with purpose—a cause at last for which to live. “You needn’t worry, Doctor,” she vowed. “I’ll watch him like a hawk.”

And she did. And there was unveiled to me the pale netherworld of dry white chicken picked clean of all fat and skin, devoid of gravy, taste, and texture; the tortures of potatoes boiled in their jackets and served butterless, dry, sporting a pitiful dab of low-fat yogurt and a sprinkle of chives; and the pain—the agony—of a bowl of Romaine lettuce dribbled with lemon juice. While Grace, genetically lean and with arteries that flowed free as the spring floods, ate corned beef and smiled.

“It’s different with women,” she explained cheerfully while she spread her toast thick with sweet fresh butter and scraped mine with polyunsaturated safflower margarine. “It has something to do with hormones, I think. Anyway, on this diet, Dr. Watkins says you can live to be a hundred.”

Alas, I could have lived to be fifty and it would have seemed a century. My greatest pleasure in life—prior to the physical Grace had insisted I undergo on my fortieth birthday and the subsequent revelations concerning my serum-cholesterol level—had been food. My job was dull, I had no hobbies, and my life with Grace was predictable and flat. But even now I can remember the joy of confronting a thick steak, medium rare, smothered in onions and mushrooms and surrounded by a sea of buttered mashed potatoes. I can remember eggs fried in butter and hickory-smoked bacon, sweet and tender-crisp. I can remember pies, their crusts flaky and rich with lard, and custards, and sweet thick ice cream—all now banned forever because they contained sinfully high amounts of cholesterol and saturated fat.

There was no respite. My breakfasts and dinners were supervised by Grace; and even my lunches away from her were spoiled by the image of her thin, shining face watching me reproachfully if I ordered anything but the turkey sandwich (no butter, very little mayonnaise) and a small green salad (no croutons, no dressing). When I ordered that, she seemed to smile approvingly as I ate without pleasure or appetite and remembered the glory of what had once been.

Even now, sitting here—damn it, what is this place?—I can remember the moment I decided to kill Grace. We were on vacation—I laugh at the word—and Grace was giving the waitress the usual instructions. “My

husband will have a glass of skimmed milk and a small fruit cup for dessert." Grace smiled at me solicitously and I smiled back, not with kindness but with relief because the decision had been made. I would skim her from my life the way she skimmed the tiny globules of fat from my soups, the way she picked my meat dry of all fat before allowing it on my plate. Divorce she would not allow—how could she part with her one sacred mission? And what judge would consider a diet suitable grounds for separation? If I left her, she would find me. She would follow me with her "Eat To Live" cookbooks and her small, sharp paring knives and her long-handled soup-skimmers.

I found my opportunity that night as Grace leaned over the balcony of our fifth-floor hotel room. A simple push, a small "oh" of surprise from Grace, and it was done. And now here I sit and wait for my steak, my mushrooms, my potatoes, and my butter. Oh, lovely word, butter. I say it aloud with no twinge of conscience, with Grace not here to judge me. Butter, butter, butter.

It has been quite a while since I ordered, but the meal will be worth the wait. I read my newspaper while I wait. Oddly enough, the headline story is about Grace and her "accident." "Woman Perishes in Fall," I read, and suppress a chuckle. To sit here in my time of mourning awaiting the pleasures she so long denied me—how fitting. Delicious, even. Then my eye catches the smaller headline, and I read on: "Husband Dies in Apparent Attempt to Save Her."

And I remember, suddenly, the railing giving way as Grace fell in silence, and the ground, with Grace below, coming abruptly up to meet me.

The waitress comes now, and she looks like Grace. She always does. She brings me breast of turkey, picked lean and dry and a small salad of Romaine with lemon juice and I close my eyes in defeat, knowing that when I open them it will all begin again.



The sisters were going to fix Mr. Cordell's wagon . . .

HARD CASH



All but impoverished by the rising cost of living, the two elderly sisters, Miss Dove and Miss Birdy Lambert, considered every means of financial retrenchment except the most obvious—that being to sell the big old Victorian house on Cherry Creek Road. It was unthinkable. They had lived there for close to eighty years and they meant to die there, even if starvation was the cause of death. Rising taxes, food and heating bills, and the cost of repairs had all but consumed the capital remaining from

their father's modest legacy. But to sell the house and move into a couple of poky rooms in Lime Pond would, they both agreed, be worse than death.

It was Willie Jenkins, come to repair a leak in the roof, who suggested a means by which the sisters might realize a rather tidy sum of money. He pointed out that the house contained a number of antiques they could sell in the nearby town of Willoughby, a fairly renowned antiques center with an assortment of dealers and shops. At first neither sister put much stock in the idea. To them the furnishings in the house were simply old-fashioned and of purely sentimental value. So it was with a sense of futility they phoned one of the dealers advertising in the "Wanted to Buy" column of the *Willoughby Register*.

The dealer who arrived in response to their call was a burly, hairless, jovial fellow named Addison Cordell. He drove a battered station wagon and was dressed as if he had come to clean out the barn. After a casual inspection of the premises, during which he was careful to mask his enthusiasm and politely disparage the value of just about everything, he asked the sisters what they were prepared to sell.

"Oh, just one or two things we don't use," replied Dove.

"For enough to pay the gas bill," added Birdy—and sensed from the dealer's reaction that the entire contents of the house would scarcely yield enough for this single expense.

"What about these chairs?" he inquired, venturing to whisk a cloud of dust off two matching Victorian chairs with threadbare needlepoint upholstery and legs too wobbly to support a baby's weight.

"How much?" asked Birdy.

The dealer wiggled the chairs until both sisters were sure they would collapse under the pressure of his beefy grip. "What are you asking?"

Dove was about to suggest ten dollars apiece when Birdy astonished her by replying, "A hundred dollars for the pair."

Dove waited for the dealer to burst into laughter. Instead, with a wry look, he said, "My dear lady, have you any idea what it would cost to restore and recover these chairs?" Then, before Birdy could answer, he said, "You ladies obviously know the value of what you have. Throw in this marble-top table and it's a deal."

Pulling out his wallet and peeling off two fifty-dollar bills, he thrust them into Birdy's hand. It would have been hard to say which of the sister's mouths fell open the widest. When the dealer asked if they were

ready to part with anything else Birdy quickly answered, "No, not at present."

Cordell did not press the issue. But as he was carrying the chairs through the hall, he paused and nodded toward a lamp on one of the tables. "I could use a lamp or two. One like that, maybe, just to use around the shop. That one's not old, of course, you realize."

"No, it's not," agreed Birdy. She remembered when Papa had bought it, and even what he'd paid for it, which had been under ten dollars.

The dealer reached under the painted glass shade and pulled the chain.

"It doesn't work," said Dove. "It's been broken for years."

"Too bad." He turned away, then hesitated. "Oh, heck, I guess I could fix the switch. I'll give you twenty bucks for it."

"You will?" said Birdy. The man was obviously an idiot.

The dealer piled the chairs and table into his wagon, then returned for the lamp, carefully removing the glass shade and carrying it as if it were a crate of eggs.

"The man's a fool," observed Dove when the sisters were alone.

"I feel ashamed," replied Birdy. "It's not honest taking advantage of him that way."

But any compunction they might have felt at gulling the rube of a dealer evaporated when the county tax bill became due shortly thereafter.

"Well, all right," agreed Dove, "but I absolutely will *not* take unfair advantage of the man's ignorance. Before we sell another thing I think we ought to acquaint ourselves with what some of our things are worth."

She suggested they take a trip into Willoughby and call on Mr. Cordell at his shop. "While I converse with him, you can sort of nose around discreetly and try to pick up some idea of what he's selling things for."

"But we must remember, Dove, everything we have is in wretched condition. We must take that into account."

The following day they rode with a neighbor into Lime Pond and from there took the bus to Willoughby. Addison Cordell's shop on Main Street was more imposing than his rustic appearance had led them to expect. At first there appeared to be no one in attendance, but after hovering about for a few minutes the sisters heard someone laugh in the back room and a moment later a glittering young woman with beige-colored hair appeared. She evidently hadn't heard the sisters come in, for when she

saw them she quickly disengaged herself from the arm of a dark-haired young man, who hung back as she advanced with a smile to wait on the sisters. In response to their inquiry she informed them that Mr. Cordell was attending an auction and wouldn't be back for several hours.

Dove's bad hip was paining her after the bus ride, so she parked herself on a parson's bench near the entrance while Birdy looked around the shop. When eventually they left and walked back toward the bus station, Birdy exploded. "That *scoundrel*! I saw it!"

"Saw what, dear?"

"Our lamp! Dove! Just you guess what the price tag said."

"Well, the poor man has to make a profit. He paid us twenty for it. He's entitled to a certain markup."

Birdy glared at her. "From twenty to three hundred and seventy-five dollars?"

Dove stopped. "Impossible."

"Sister, I'm not blind. And there was a little card by it reading 'Signed, Jefferson.'"

"Outrageous! Did you see our chairs?"

"No—and it's a good thing I didn't. I might have had heart failure."

They continued on their way, Dove leaning on her sister's arm for support. "Do you suppose he had his eye on that lamp from the minute he came in the house?"

"Of course he did. Oh, I just *wish* he'd been there! I'd have told *him* a thing or two!"

"Sister, we've been swindled."

On the bus, Birdy grew thoughtful. When they arrived home she was in a suspiciously cheerful mood. "Dove, my dear," she said, "I think we're going to do more business with Mr. Cordell."

"Never!"

"Now, you listen to me. We're going to fix that fellow's wagon—and get paid for doing it."

"How?"

"You just leave that to me. I wouldn't want to offend your Christian conscience."

"Oh, Birdy, we mustn't do anything dishonest!"

"Maybe *you* mustn't."

The following week another phone call was made to Addison Cordell

and he offered to make a return visit to the house. Birdy coached Dove on what to say when she was cued.

The dealer was in an even more jovial mood when he arrived. His appraising eyes roamed over the parlor. The ladies prevailed upon him to enjoy a cup of mint tea while they discussed possible additional transactions.

"I hope you don't think we cheated you on your earlier purchases," remarked Birdy sweetly.

"Oh, you ladies drive a hard bargain, but I couldn't stay in business long if I wasn't square with my suppliers. Honesty's the best policy, I always say." Cordell finished his tea and smiled. "So, what are you ready to part with today, ladies?"

Birdy deliberated. Dove looked vaguely about the room and then, at a sign from her sister, cried, "Oh, Birdy, *dear*, we can't sell *all* of Papa's belongings! I'd rather starve than do that!"

"Well, I wouldn't!" declared Birdy. "I'm the one who has to dust all this clutter, what with your bad hip and all. Mr. Cordell is welcome to everything, as far as I'm concerned."

The dealer could scarcely conceal his greed at this, but Dove put a damper on his elation by declaring she would hear of no such wanton disrespect.

"I have a much better idea," she said. "It would break my heart to defy one of Papa's last wishes; but I suppose we must be practical. Rather than sell everything, I'd prefer to part with the single most valuable thing we possess. Then we don't have to think about selling another thing for months and months."

The sparkle returned to the dealer's eyes. "And what might that be, Miss Lambert?"

Birdy lifted a cautionary hand. "Sister, if you're thinking what I think you are, you may put the thought right out of your head. Shame! I wouldn't dream of parting with *that*."

"Oh, please, sister. I'll just die if we have to sell something every week. And Papa would understand, you know he would."

This led to a prolonged squabble between the sisters during which the dealer could hardly restrain his curiosity. If even they considered this mysterious item valuable, what could it be? He had visions of some truly rare treasure, something their father must have realized was of great and enduring value. When, at last, with a sigh of capitulation, Birdy agreed

to permit the dealer a glimpse of the treasured item, there were beads of sweat on Addison Cordell's scalp.

With an air of profound ceremony, Dove led the way into Papa's study. With a gesture of her arm, as if she were unveiling a masterpiece, she announced grandly, "There!"

The dealer's eyes darted swiftly about the room. Shelves of old books, a library table in golden oak, a few nondescript chairs, a humidior, and an Empire secretary, black with age. Was it something hidden from view? he wondered. All he could see that inspired the slightest interest was the secretary—a good, saleable piece, but no treasure by any means.

Dove whispered piously, "Papa died in it."

His mind on the secretary, the dealer gave her a startled look. But both sisters were gazing reverently at a shabby old Morris chair standing near the heavily curtained window. His heart sank. They couldn't be serious.

Dove moved forward, as though toward an altar, her hand lovingly stroking the worn horsehide fabric of the oak-framed Morris chair. "He did, you know. He died in this chair."

"As he practically lived in it," whispered Birdy.

"Oh, yes. Those last years he almost never stirred from his beloved Morris chair."

The dealer dragged a handkerchief from his hip pocket and morosely wiped his perspiring brow. "That's very touching, ladies. But where is this item you wanted me to see?" he asked hopefully.

"But *this* is it, Mr. Cordell. Papa's chair."

Dove was evidently suffering a change of heart. "Oh, dear, I don't know. I truly don't. I can remember Papa sitting in it the day before he died, and exactly what he said. Remember, sister? He called us in and made us promise never to get rid of this chair. 'I don't give a hang what you do with the rest of the stuff,' he said, 'but hold onto this chair. It's the most valuable thing I possess.'"

"Papa was sentimental," explained Birdy. "He always talked as if we wouldn't have to worry about a thing—ever. But when it came right down to it there wasn't really anything in the way of—well—hard cash when he died."

"And the situation hasn't improved," added Dove with a dismal shake of her head. "We've no choice, sister. The chair must go."

Tears appeared in Birdy's eyes. She regarded the dealer with pensive

resignation. "My sister and I are willing to part with the Morris chair, Mr. Cordell."

Plainly disappointed, the dealer said, "Well, ladies; I hate to say this, but Morris chairs aren't much in demand. Their value is minimal."

"Oh, but, sir," protested Dove, "this chair is special!"

"Special?"

"Papa said so. He told us it is a very special chair."

"I'm sorry to disappoint you, Miss Lambert, but I don't think so. Still, there's a buyer for everything, if one's prepared to be patient. What will you take for it?"

The sisters exchanged considering glances. Birdy said, "Oh, I'm sure Papa knew what he was talking about. But I suppose we could let it go for two thousand."

The dealer gasped, then chortled. "My dear Miss Lambert, you can't be serious."

Dove looked embarrassed. "Sister, that is a great deal of money."

"For Papa's chair?"

"Well—yes, you're right, dear. Papa wouldn't want us to sell it unless we could get at least two thousand dollars for it."

The dealer started toward the door. "I'm sorry, ladies. I wouldn't give you two hundred dollars for that chair."

Dove spoke up. "Sister, you said yourself Mr. Cordell must make a decent profit. And in all honesty I can't believe Papa would place quite so high a value on the chair, despite what he said."

"You mean what he tried to say." She turned to the dealer. "It was right after his stroke. He tried to tell us about the chair. He made such an effort."

Dove said, "I think he was trying to tell us he wanted to die in the chair."

"Perhaps. I only know he was insistent we shouldn't part with it."

The dealer was clearly reluctant to leave empty-handed. "You ladies let me know when you're ready to part with something I can afford to buy."

Birdy twisted her handkerchief and looked imploringly at her sister. "Dear, we simply must have the money for the taxes next week. There must be *something*. The books, perhaps? And this is a marvelously sturdy table—"

The dealer dismissed the items with a glance. "I might be able to do

something with the secretary," he said. "Empire's not in great demand but I might be able to go as high as a hundred and fifty and take a chance on it."

Birdy hesitated only as long as it took for the dealer to whip out his wallet and produce three fresh-looking fifty-dollar bills. "I'll get a cloth and dust it off," she said.

"That's not necessary."

"Well, we must empty out the drawers," said Dove. It took her only a few minutes as most of the drawers were empty.

"It was Papa's secretary," explained Birdy. "We've never used it."

One of the drawers resisted Dove's efforts to open it. "Oh, dear. Come to think of it, we never *did* find the key to this one after Papa died. Perhaps you could have one made."

"No problem." The dealer grinned. "I've got a barrel full of keys."

The sisters stood to the side as the dealer wrestled the top section off the bottom, brought it out to his station wagon, then returned and muscled the lower section out of the house. As they watched him depart, Birdy laughed. "I'd give my eyeteeth to see his fat face when he opens that drawer."

"Oh, sister, I'm frightened. What we did was dishonest."

"It serves him right."

"But he's such a cunning rascal. He'll know it's a trick."

"He won't know for sure. And he's too greedy to pass up the chance to make sure. Besides, the letter he'll find in that drawer could fool anyone. I used Papa's old ledger paper, and his pen and ink. If Mr. Cordell thinks there's even the ghost of a chance Papa hid twenty thousand dollars in that old Morris chair, he won't be able to sleep until he gets his hands on it."

"But when he finds out he's been hoodwinked—"

Birdy gave her head a careless toss. "Let the buyer beware. That's the first rule of the game. As *he* would tell us, you can be sure, if we made a fuss about the lamp."

"Well, I'll be on needles and pins till we hear from him, I know that."

As it happened, the Misses Lambert never again did hear from Addison Cordell. They did, however, hear *about* him, and what they heard—that is to say, what they read in the paper—shocked them as nothing had ever shocked them in their long lives.

"Dove! Listen to this!" cried Birdy, the newspaper trembling in her hands.

"Oh, please, I don't want to hear another word about inflation."

"It's about Addison Cordell. He's been murdered!"

It was true. The dealer had been found beside his station wagon on a country road with his head smashed in. Robbery was surmised to have been the motive. The dealer had been known to travel about to sales and auctions with large sums of money on his person. The police were evidently without suspects.

"Well, at least you can stop fretting about what he would have done if he'd found out we tricked him," Birdy said. "He's dead and we're none the richer."

"Thank the dear Lord for that," sighed Dove. "It was a wicked thing for us to have done. Poor man! What a dreadful way to die. I do hope they catch whoever did it."

As the days passed with no further developments in the case, the possibility of identifying the killer grew more remote. But although there were fewer and fewer allusions to the murder in the newspaper, it continued to occupy the sisters' thoughts and conversation. Then, less than two weeks after the dealer's death, Dove happened to peek out the window and see his battered station wagon enter the drive and park before the house. She called to Birdy and, side by side, they peered through the curtains. Two people climbed out of the vehicle and approached the front door—one was the sulky-eyed young man from Cordell's shop, the other the lady with the beige-colored hair.

"Mercy sakes, whatever can *they* want?" wondered Birdy.

The woman flashed them a smile. "I believe we've already met. When you were at the shop. I'm Sylvia Cordell, Addison Cordell's wife—widow." Her smile changed rather too abruptly into a mournful grimace. "You heard about what happened, of course?" They were standing in the hall, just inside the front door.

Birdy acknowledged that they *had* read about it and expressed her condolence. The smile and the grimace succeeded each other with disquieting rapidity on the woman's face. "Thank you," she said. "I'm still quite shattered. But life must go on. One must pick up the pieces. I've taken over the business now, and—oh, forgive me—this is Mr. Derwent, my assistant. He's been a tremendous help to me."

The unsmiling young man nodded. He was a handsome enough young fellow, Birdy had to concede, although she didn't like the way his eyes were roaming around, as if he was putting a price tag on everything he saw. And to think that this glittery young female was Cordell's *wife*! That *was* a surprise. Especially when Birdy remembered how chummy she and Derwent had appeared that day in the shop.

"I know my husband was looking forward to doing a lot more business with you ladies, and I hope I can pick up where he left off." Mrs. Cordell pulled a checkbook from her bag. "So here I am, all ready to deal."

Birdy felt an instant aversion to the idea of "dealing" with these two. "Oh, well—I do wish you'd called before driving all the way out here. My sister and I have decided not to part with anything else, at least for the time being."

Mrs. Cordell smiled. "I hope you haven't come to an understanding with some other dealer."

"No, it isn't that. We simply don't—"

"My husband mentioned one particular piece you put rather a high value on. Derwent, do you remember what it was?"

The young man wandered to the study door. "Yeah, it was a chair."

"Of course," she said. "A Morris chair."

"That the one?" inquired Derwent, jerking his head toward the study.

Birdy moved closer to Dove. "Er—yes. But Mr. Cordell wasn't interested."

Without waiting to be invited, Sylvia Cordell followed Derwent into the study. Dove and Birdy trailed after them. The woman regarded the chair with an appraising glance. "I think you'll find my tastes somewhat different from poor Addison's. They may not be beautiful, but I think such pieces have their own charm." She looked at Birdy. "But he did say you put a somewhat unrealistic value on it."

"Only because we don't honestly want to part with it. It was our father's favorite chair."

The longer Sylvia Cordell examined the chair the stronger its appeal seemed to grow. "Oh, but I really *must* have it, Miss Lambert. Mustn't we, Harry?"

"It's nice," said the laconic Harry.

"I'm sorry," said Birdy, striving for tartness, but with a slight nervous quaver. "We don't wish to sell it."

Dove reached for Birdy's hand. "We told Mr. Cordell we *might* sell

it—for two thousand dollars—but we've changed our minds."

Sylvia Cordell laughed. "Well, I'm not about to give you two thousand for it." She drew a pen from her bag and, opening the checkbook, prepared to start writing. "I'll give you two hundred. And that's much more than anyone else would."

The touch of Dove's hand seemed to strengthen Birdy's resolve. "That may very well be, Mrs. Cordell, but, as I said, we don't wish to sell Papa's chair."

"Oh, dear. Addison said you were such reasonable ladies. Didn't he say that, Harry?"

Harry nodded grimly. "Yeah, he said that. Do you ladies live out here all by yourselves?"

"Yes," replied Birdy. "We've always lived here."

"Aren't you scared, so far from any neighbors?"

"We've never had any trouble," said Dove, disliking the young man intensely.

"Neither had poor Addison," said Sylvia Cordell. "But times have changed. No one is safe any more. There's so much crime and lawlessness, even out here in the country. No respect for property."

Derwent nodded. "This old place would be easy to break into. You ladies could be robbed and murdered in your beds."

Birdy sniffed. "At our age, young man, that might be a blessing."

"But you wouldn't want the thieves to have all your belongings, would you?" said Sylvia Cordell. "People who couldn't possibly appreciate fine things."

At that moment Derwent suddenly turned, his elbow knocking a charming little bisque figurine off the table onto the floor.

"Harry!" cried Sylvia Cordell. "Do be careful!" She turned to Birdy with an apologetic smile. "I'll pay for it, of course."

The figurine was one of Dove's favorites. She knelt to gather up the pieces. Harry's only comment was to pull a cigarette lighter from his pocket and ignite it. "And after they murdered you, they might just burn the place down over your heads. Or maybe they wouldn't kill you. Maybe they'd just tie you up and let you burn along with it. Would *that* be a blessing, Miss Lambert?"

From the look on the young man's face, Birdy knew he hadn't knocked over the figurine by accident. She began to be afraid. Sylvia Cordell laid her hand on the back of the Morris chair. "Don't let Harry alarm you,

Miss Lambert. But he is right, you know. Terrible things do happen—like what happened to my poor husband. And living alone here with all these antiques—well, you're simply asking for trouble."

Birdy tried not to show her alarm. Dove's hand felt moist in hers. "We'll think about it and let you know," she said.

Sylvia Cordell smiled warmly. "You do that, dear. We'll give you a fair price on everything."

"Take my advice, ladies," Derwent added. "Don't think too long. You never know when it might be too late." Once more he flicked the lighter and waved the tiny flame back and forth.

Sylvia Cordell wrote out the check. "Meanwhile, just to show our good faith, we'll take the chair with us now."

Birdy tried to thrust the check away. "Oh, but we don't want—"

Sylvia Cordell forced the check into her hand. "Harry and I are going on a buying trip to New England next week. But we'll be back and we'll be in touch. Put the chair in the wagon, Harry."

As soon as the station wagon had driven away, the sisters collapsed on the sofa. "Well, did you *ever*?" cried Birdy.

"Oh, sister, what dreadful people! That awful Harry—I do believe he broke that figurine on purpose."

"Of course he did! And I'll bet my life he knows all about murdering people too."

"Oh, sister!" Dove's hand flew to her mouth. "You're not suggesting—"

"I'm not suggesting anything. But, by hook or by crook, they were going to have Papa's chair. That means Mr. Cordell must have told his wife about the letter in the desk. And it's as clear as the nose on your face that awful Harry is more than her assistant." Suddenly she went white. "Oh, dear God. If they *did* kill poor Mr. Cordell—oh, Dove, that means we're responsible."

"Oh, dear!"

The thought was too hideous to contemplate. Birdy quickly thrust it away. "We mustn't let our imaginations carry us away. If it were true, I can't believe they'd dare come here like that and—and threaten us."

"But they did. They did threaten us. Oh, what shall we do?"

Birdy thought about it. "I suppose we could talk to the police. Only we can't prove anything. We'd probably only get ourselves into hot water. No, sister, I think it's time we faced up to reality. Much as I dread the

thought of it, I think we really must move out of this old place. After today, a cozy little flat in Lime Pond doesn't seem like such a bad idea after all."

"I agree," Dove said. "But how can we? Who's going to buy a big old barn like this nowadays? The heating bills alone are more than most people can afford."

Birdy didn't argue this point. "We'll simply have to get what we can for our antiques and live on the proceeds until the house can be sold."

Dove looked around the room with deepening hopelessness. "Let's face it, dear, we don't have that many good pieces."

Over breakfast the following morning, they decided to lose no time in contacting another antique dealer in Willoughby and disposing of everything they could before the monstrous pair returned from their New England trip. After clearing away the breakfast dishes, Dove came into the study to find Birdy sitting, pen in hand, at the library table.

"Are you writing to a dealer, sister?"

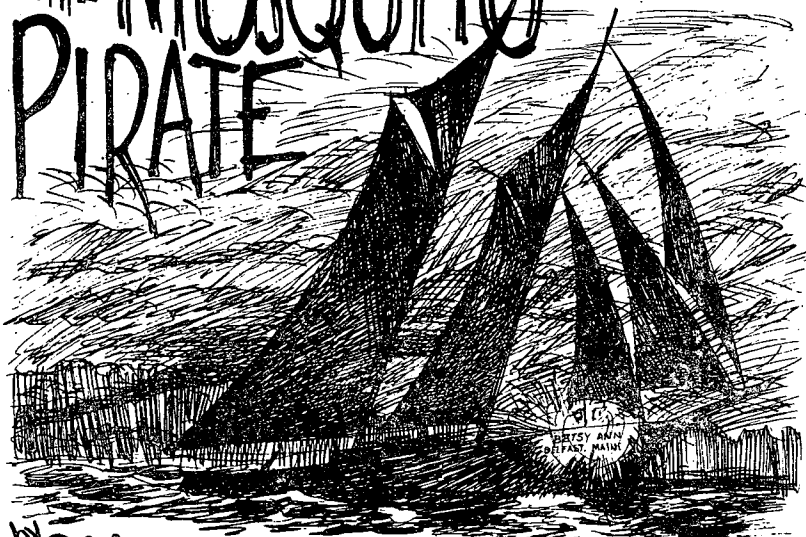
"Not exactly."

Dove stole across the room and peeped over her sister's shoulder. Birdy was using Papa's pen and laboriously inscribing a note on a sheet of his age-darkened ledger paper. "My beloved girls, knowing as you do my inveterate distrust of banks, you will find, upon my death, hidden in the case of the old grandfather clock—"

The November 19 issue of *Alfred Hitchcock's Mystery Magazine* will be on sale October 28.

Hiram Pride was not the pride of Prideport . . .

THE MOSQUITO PIRATE



by **PHILIP SCHUYLER**

The Pride home on Pride Hill in the Maine fishing village of Prideport boasts a crude tower that faces the Atlantic. Hiram Pride built it soon after his parents died. Although the house had none of the ornate splendor of a widow's walk, common along the New England coast, the glint of a brass spyglass when struck by sun or moonlight showed that it was used for some purpose, if only the idle watching of ships at sea.

Hi was an idle sort. To that extent he differed a great deal from his

parents, who worked themselves to an early death setting and hauling in their lobster pots.

"He wun't amount to much," neighbors agreed. "He's plain lazy."

"I jes' like to take it easy," Hi countered.

For nearly a century Pride folk had been lobster- and fishermen, following one another to the small village graveyard. Never offering to help his parents, Hi had early in life vowed he would find some other way to make a living. Most port girls grew up to work in the mills of the nearby city before settling down to married life. The boys followed their fathers and battled the rough seas through frigid winters and blazing hot summers. What little money could be saved went into mattress banks. In addition to buying lumber for the tower, Hi used his mattress dollars to build a sleek twenty-two-foot skiff. He put black sails on her and named her *Black Pirate*.

"Nonsense," scoffed the villagers.

Despite Hi's good looks and six-foot sturdiness, they bode him no good, saying, "His ma and pa, Maggie and Danny, kep' him in vittles. He dun't and wun't do nothin' for hisself."

Yet before a year was half spent Hi began to fool them. Going to Boston, he bought expensive suits and wore them back in the village, where he spent his days lolling around. Prideport girls rolled their eyes at him, but he paid them no heed. When he reached twenty-two years of age, he brought a well built young woman from "somewheres down the rud" to the preacher of the Union Church. The preacher married them following a regular Sunday-morning service. Nine young women openly wept into their handkerchiefs.

"It might have bin me," they mourned.

Later this same group, talking among themselves, wondered how Hi could do nuthin', and dress so good, and keep a wife too, even buying her fancy clothes.

Pride wasn't telling.

One day four men who had gone to district school with Hi determined to solve the mystery.

"Tain't in the days he works," they reasoned. "All he does is show off his city suits and his new skiff he built hisself."

That night they posted themselves behind the pine trees that surrounded the Pride house on Pride Hill. At first it seemed they would

catch nothing but mosquito bites and itches. Scratching and slapping, they waited. Eight eyes focused on Hi's tower. The four were quite certain that the tower surely must have something to do with Hi's secret moneymaking. They knew he wasn't using his skiff for lobstering.

At last the tower window opened. From it protruded the brass spyglass, held at the level it would be by a six-footer like Hi.

"That's him—that's Hi," whispered the leader of the four to one man he had kept near to him behind a tree in the darkness. "Run to the beach and see if you can make out what Hi's sightin' with that glass of his."

A few minutes later the man returned. "Looks as if he were spottin' the top gallant lights of one of them three-masted Baltimore schooners," he reported. "You know there's many go south about this time."

The door of the Pride home opened and slammed shut. Hi's rubber boots clumped down the hard-packed dirt road to the beach. The four men let the sounds get a distance from them, then silently followed.

Reaching the beach, they saw Hi fetch his skiff from the salt grass and haul her to the water. The tide flowed high and calm and Hi splashed out through the foam, pushing the skiff ahead of him. In water that reached the top of his high rubber boots, he climbed aboard and raised the sails. The skiff was gaff-rigged. Hi put up both flying and outer jibs as well as the mainsail.

Seeing all this, the four didn't know then that Pride had a ten-pound cannon stowed in the *Black Pirate's* bow hatch, along with powder, fuses, a ramrod, and a dozen balls. Nor did they know that Hi had so fixed the hatch that the cannon could be easily raised and that the gun was loaded, ready to be fired.

Hidden further up the beach the four had a dory to which they dashed after the skiff had moved out of sight. Without making a sound, they got it into the water. Three manned the oars and the fourth held the helm as they followed the *Black Pirate* with feathered strokes. Because Hi was forced to tack, they were able to keep up with him, but far enough behind as not to be heard or seen.

Two miles from the beach the skiff came within hailing distance of a schooner. A lantern swinging from her bow lit up the name *Betsy Ann*, Belfast, Maine.

"Ahoy, *Betsy Ann*!" Hi bellowed through a megaphone.

A voice answered his shout, and Hi continued: "Tell yer cap'n Hi Pride is here with his ten-pounder an' enough powder and shot to blow you

to the bottom! He'll know I ain't afeered to fire! Tell him to throw me a purse with a hundered silver dollars in it! Ef he dun't, I'll fire!"

In short order, a large leather bag came hurtling down from the schooner's deck, landing accurately at Hi's feet. He had kept the *Black Pirate* skillfully sailing abeam of the moving three-master.

The four who watched the transaction swung their dory around, and again with feathered strokes headed for a cove further up the beach than Pride Hill. In muffled voices as they rowed, they figured how it happened captains of those coastwise schooners had not taken action themselves. They guessed they had come to know Hiram Pride and to fear him. They concluded him foolhardy enough to fire that cannon, and wooden ships like theirs had been sunk by ten-pounders during the Revolution and the War of 1812. Profits suffered if they kept further out to sea when passing Prideport. To sum up, killing off this mosquito pirate was not worth the time, the trouble, or the heavy expense that might be involved. Better to give him the hundred silver dollars.

"So that's it," panted an oarsman. "But now Hi an' his *Black Pirate* has got the last purse."

"Yup," agreed the man at the helm. "Should have stopped him long ago."

Next day the four reported what they had seen to federal authorities in Portland. Hi was arrested, arraigned, tried, and sentenced to twenty years in federal prison for that one offense witnessed. A heavy fine was also exacted. Even so, Hi left enough mattress money to keep Miranda and Hiram Jr. living comfortably enough until his release after half the time the judge ordered.

As to what happened then: "Wal, yer got to figger thet one out for yourselves," say those who tell the story. "Ain't no Prides livin' aroun' here no more. Their name is only on the town, the hill, and on some stones in the graveyard.

"But we have our notions, knowin' Hi like we do. He ain't ever a-goin' to work like mos' folks do—not him. An' yet he's got to have his fancy suits and fancy livin'. After all, when Hi and Miranda left Prideport along with Hi Junior, they was towin' the *Black Pirate* back of 'em. Nor did he leave the brass cannon nor that spyglass behind 'em.

"It's a long, long coastline from Maine to Florida, with lots and lots of ships and yachts that sail it."

Tallow had met his bride under unusual circumstances . . .

THE WEDDING PARTY



by **JOHN BUXTON HILTON**

There were two of them at the bar: Gladwin, a big man even before he'd acquired a beer-drinker's pot—if ever there'd been such a time—and talking to him was Charles Garside, a mannequin in immaculate uniform, making sure everyone knew he was drinking orange juice. He was Inspector on town duty this Saturday.

"Get the speeches over and we'll see if 'Grandstand' can keep me awake."

Televised football from his armchair was likely to be the sum of Gladwin's physical ambition for the afternoon.

"The town will be quiet enough unless United loses." Trouble from the northern club's supporters was the worst Garside expected. Then: "Good God, what's *he* want here?"

Both officers came, if not to attention, at least to a noticeable state of uneasy alertness at the sight of a tall, spare, and consciously dignified man in mufti who had just come up the stairs from the public part of the hotel.

"I didn't know Kenworthy knew Benny. And he had no hand in the Peterson case."

"The papers may have crossed his desk—but that would hardly have brought him here."

These were the last few years at the Yard for Detective Chief Superintendent Simon Kenworthy. He had a somewhat remote overview of affairs in this division, but the way things were going these days one wouldn't expect to see him unless it meant trouble. He joined his colleagues at the bar, nodding affably, and, casting an eye at Garside's orange juice, ordered the same. So trouble was what he was here for.

"Still on the force, then, Simon?"

But Kenworthy shrugged Gladwin's heavy humor aside with the treatment it deserved. Since the new Commissioner had taken over, a number of senior officers had been suspended and were awaiting trial. Those who had been diplomatically allowed to resign were now counted in the hundreds.

"You know Benny, then?" Gladwin always believed in rushing in.

"No."

"The Peterson business didn't really come your way, did it?"

"I'm just interested," Kenworthy said. And then, as if in an afterthought, a kind of apology for his curtness, he came in with a mock insult in Gladwin's own style. "I suppose three-quarters of your division will be neglecting their duty for the sake of the free food here today."

"I dare say a few will drop in for their lunch break," Gladwin said, an answer to be taken at its factual value if that was the way Kenworthy fancied it. You never knew with Kenworthy.

Then there was a racket up the stairs and the main body arrived, headed by the best man, a Detective-Sergeant, who was dutifully watching after the bridesmaids' interests. The bridegroom was also a Detective-

Sergeant, Benny Tallow, a stocky little bruiser with his hair in a duck's-arse style as if he'd never outgrown the first Rock 'n' Roll wave of his adolescence. Some senior station officers were still put out by the way he dressed for duty. Today, of course, he was wearing the most impeccable morning suit money could hire.

The woman he was marrying was enjoying herself. Even in her bridal white—which had inspired predictable comment in high quarters as well as low—there was nothing demure about Dolly Bartlett.

"An investment, I reckon," Gladwin said. "So she won't have to ask boy scouts in for tea in her old age."

Six months ago there'd been nothing between Benny and the girl. Then had come the Peterson kidnapping and Sergeant Tallow had made a name for himself, had had the kid back being photographed with his mother almost before the ink was dry in the Incident Book. It had undoubtedly shortened his odds in the promotion stakes. And he'd drawn Dolly Bartlett out of the same bag: the sort of woman you saw modelling beach mattresses. But at the moment she was kissing Station-Sergeant Dodger Green in a suitably coy manner on the cheek, with half the off-duty night staff queuing up for their turn. Her eyes swivelled lovingly in the direction of Benny at tactful intervals.

It was a cold buffet, so people could circulate and continue to spiral in on Dolly Bartlett—correction, Dolly Tallow. That was a new fact of life that was still making some men pinch themselves. Kenworthy showed no urgency to get at the food. He was happy to wait until the milling had thinned out. So Gladwin and Garside waited patiently too, not willing to move more than a hand's-breadth from Kenworthy's sleeve. Kenworthy leaned with his back on the bar counter, beaming benignly out at the revellers.

Benign? Kenworthy? The malignant sod—what was he after?

As if reading their minds, and eager to show what an agreeable cowson he could be, Kenworthy became a measurable stage more affable still, didn't actually discourage Gladwin's next effort to find out what was going on in high places, and wasn't even beyond passing on the odd titbit.

"Of course, the trouble always comes when things go to extremes. It's arguable that with crime at today's pitch, you let your undercover men practically live with the villains. The next thing you know they're practically living with nobody else. Then they start setting up jobs for them. And then suddenly the villains have outlived their utility. They've become

an embarrassment. So you book them for any odd charge you have lying about. It's only fair, really, you argue: it's their turn. Only they don't care for such treatment, some of them."

A safe enough sentiment, and nothing safer than to agree.

"I seem to see a small gap opening up in the neighborhood of the cold salmon. What about it, gentlemen? Shall we move in?"

So they advanced on the foothills of food, though Kenworthy still showed no signs of wanting to approach the bridal couple. Gladwin, though, who reckoned to read a man's motives in the curl of his little finger, noticed that now he'd come into the throng he wanted to stay at least within earshot of the principals.

"Tell me, Gladwin—I know Tallow hit the jackpot on that Peterson case. You weren't actually on duty the night the child was taken?"

"I was off duty, but on call for anything of that magnitude."

"And did he call you?"

"Oh, yes—that's clear from the log, surely?"

"I just don't happen to carry all the details in my head," Kenworthy said, perhaps a trifle too smoothly.

"Any particular reason why you want all the details again?" Gladwin asked bluntly.

"I just wondered. I'm always wondering—it's an occupational hazard. What's happened to the mayonnaise?" Some ten seconds later he said, "I wondered, for example, whether Tallow's always as smart as he was that time."

"He's a reliable lad. The Peterson case had him on form."

"I was hoping my question would dig out something deeper than that, Chief Inspector."

"All right, let's be candid. It brings out the best in Tallow when the headlines are going to be big enough and black enough. May I ask why you're interested? Is his promotion coming up?"

"Not promotion," Kenworthy said. But at that moment silence was called for speeches.

The bride's father had a suave style, but did not know the age of his own jokes. The best man was barely this side of obscenity, but seemed highly appreciated by the denizens of the CID room. Gladwin, who had to show the flag on behalf of upstairs, was so clumsily ironical it was a wonder the bride didn't throw the cake at him. The champagne was pale-yellow in color and had bubbles in it.

The couple were leaving on a mid-evening charter flight from Gatwick: Faro and a package deal in the Algarve. Benny Tallow kept looking at his watch, but the best man seemed to be reassuring him. Garside said it was time he took a stroll in the direction of the football ground.

Dolly at last hitched the white dress up over her ankles, tore herself away from demonstrative farewells, and started toward the stairs. A room had been reserved for the couple to change in. It was then that a man in his late twenties, a solid two hundred and ten pounds of him, moved away from his cronies and pressed his way purposively over to Tallow.

"Who's that?" Kenworthy asked.

"Bates. Detective-Constable. He hasn't been in CID long—a couple of months at the most."

Bates succeeded at last in drawing Tallow's attention. "Could you spare me a minute, Sarge?"

"What? Now?"

"I've got to write a supplementary on Beavis. There's something I need to know."

"I have a plane to catch. Why don't you fly out to Portugal and come knocking on my door in the middle of the night?" But Tallow attended ill-graciously to his junior, and two minutes later followed his wife upstairs. Within another two minutes he was back again, waving a piece of paper and looking, for Benny Tallow, remarkably upset.

The crowd formed a loose scrimmage around him, which Kenworthy did not join. Gladwin penetrated to the source of the excitement and came back laughing like a great flabby earthquake. "It's those damned Detective-Constables of mine. They've kidnapped Dolly. They're asking a ransom for her."

Gladwin really did think it the joke of the decade, but Kenworthy was not particularly amused. And Tallow was in a towering rage, out of all proportion to what was, after all, only a prank.

"I'll have that damned Bates—he kept me talking after Dolly went upstairs! We've a plane to catch!"

"I expect you'll be on it," someone said, "always provided, of course, you can raise the ransom."

Now even Kenworthy was entering mildly into the carnival spirit. "How much are they asking, as a matter of interest?"

Tallow looked at him with a huge reserve of hatred and sulkily handed him a piece of paper. "This was pinned to the door of the room."

The note asked for fifty thousand pounds in Portuguese *escudos* at current rates of exchange, and in used and assorted notes.

"How much was asked for the Peterson child?" Kenworthy wanted to know.

"Fifty thousand. Look, Chief Superintendent, I don't happen to find this funny."

"Oh, I don't know. I don't go much for practical jokes myself, but if someone had played this on me I'm damned if I'd let them see me get stewed up about it. Maybe some of these youngsters resent the publicity you derived from the Peterson affair."

Tallow hadn't the grace not to snarl. He was obviously a man who was never far from aggressive, even in such civilities as he admitted into his life. He was without respect for Kenworthy's generation, and therefore without respect for Kenworthy. He gave the impression of one hundred percent devotion—but devotion to what? If Tallow happened to be a bent copper, he would have nothing but contempt for a straight one.

He continued to smolder. He had had one put over on him by his underlings, for whom he had little but contempt.

"I'd calm down if I were you," Kenworthy told him. "You know you'll get her back. You know they'll deliver her to you at Gatwick. And, if I'm any judge, from what I saw of your wife at a distance, I'd say she's enjoying every minute of it."

Perhaps that was part of the trouble.

"The less fuss you make, the less satisfaction you'll give them," Kenworthy said. "Take a seat and tell me a bit more about the Peterson villains. I've read the case file, of course. But carbon flimsies never do much for local color."

"Good God! I must get off to Gatwick—this is no time for filling in casework!"

"What time's your check-in?"

Tallow told him.

"That gives you time to get there with your handbrake on. Come on, lad, take the weight off your legs and the sandpaper off your nerve-endings."

Tallow reluctantly drew up a chair, but found no comfort in it. "I can't think what it is you want to know. It was straightforward stuff."

Peterson was a dog-track bookmaker with well worn tire-trails to Har-

ingey, Catford, and Dumpton Park. He was an amicable type—he could afford to be—he paid out his winners as if he shared their pleasure, and if ever he came into a bar full of disgruntled punters he always stood a round with notes pulled off a roll of what he openly called “the mugs’ money.” He was in his mid-thirties, still rather fancied his looks, and was beginning—but only just—to run to fat. He had been married some ten years and his only child was a son four years old. The Petersons had been celebrating their wedding anniversary when intruders had apparently let themselves in the front door of their not exactly impoverished villa. There were no signs that it had been opened other than soberly with a latch-key. The kidnappers appeared to have made their way up and down the shallow, deep-pile-carpeted stairs without rousing the babysitter, who had been deeply entrenched in front of a soporific imitation log fire, committed to a late-night television talk-show. Only when she went upstairs shortly before midnight on what she termed a routine patrol did she discover the empty bed. She had searched frantically in places both obvious and absurd, then called the police.

“And,” Kenworthy said, “the babysitter was a Miss Dorothy Bartlett—the woman, in fact, you have just married?”

“That’s right.” Tallow glared at him, challenging him to make something out of it.

Gladwin came spontaneously to his support. “He gave her the roughest ten hours I’ve ever seen a suspect put through. I sat through two of them myself.”

“And you didn’t know her before this?” Kenworthy asked Tallow.

“I’d seen her, of course. She lives on the manor. You could hardly miss her, could you? But I’d never spoken to her.”

“It was you she reached at the station that night?”

“She dialled 999. The call came through to us.”

“And you were there to take it?”

“I was working late on a case report.”

“On a Saturday night? On your rest day?”

It couldn’t have been lost on either of the local men that Kenworthy must, at some time or other, have gone perceptively through the duty book. Gladwin came in unbidden to the Sergeant’s rescue again. “It was the Beavis affair. That was big stuff for this division. I’d called for a report by the weekend.”

“I see. And at what stage did Miss Bartlett—now Mrs. Tallow—ring

through to the restaurant at which her employer was dining?"

"She didn't. We did."

"Why was that?"

"She was living on hope—I've got to admit, ridiculous hope. I think she hoped we were magicians."

"She surely wasn't a girl who had to babysit for pin money?"

"Not at all. She's a top secretary—a P.A., really—and a friend of the Petersons. They paid more for six hours of her services than the force pays me in a month."

"And to about as much purpose, as far as I can see," Kenworthy said, but continued on before Tallow could pick up the remark. "And the ransom demand came how and when?"

"Overnight. A note stuck in an empty milk bottle, found and handed in at the house by the milkman."

"And you did the usual thing, laid on the usual sort of pick-up, with the usual assorted stacks of suitably trimmed paper?"

"Chief Inspector Gladwin organized all that."

Gladwin spoke up. "Fifty thousand mock-up pounds in a plastic supermarket bag."

"But Tallow beat you to it?"

"Tallow brought the kid in. And, at the same time, Freddy Milligan and Sue Ellis."

"I know. I've had a word with them in their remand cells. They don't like the situation," Kenworthy said.

"I dare say they don't. But Sue shouldn't have left her dabs on a bus ticket she dropped in the villa. And a not-unknown craftsman called Marsden has signed a statement about cutting a latchkey for Milligan from a soap-impression."

"I know that too. Marsden's been to see me. We know each other from a previous case. Some of these regulars are ludicrously sentimental about old loyalties. By and large, they don't approve of kidnapping. Moreover, Marsden tells me he owed you a favor for letting him out of the Beavis job."

"Look, this is fantasy. My plane—"

"Won't leave yet a while. One phone call from me and you can bypass formalities, get aboard till last call. Freddy Milligan and Sue Ellis are saying you put this together. Marsden thinks the same. And so do I."

"Kenworthy, I am not going to be—"

"Keep your voice down, man."

The tiered showmanship of the buffet lunch had disintegrated under the mass attack. Sausage rolls had been abandoned almost whole on soiled plates. Bright red table napkins lay screwed up on the floor. Someone had doused a cigarette-end in champagne dregs.

"You brought the child back," Kenworthy said, "on information received from an unoccupied furnished house in Highgate. Milligan and his girl friend had been sent to that house on a wild-goose chase at the operative time. And meanwhile, you'd seen Peterson privately. You'd told him that these wads of false notes seldom worked and that, in your view, Gladwin's plan would only endanger the child. Peterson paid up, using you as a go-between. He's that sort of father."

"Full marks for a sick imagination, Chief Superintendent."

"The child had even known his real captors as Freddy and Sue. You have a smart eye for detail, Tallow."

Tallow laughed, ham-acting. So did Kenworthy. Bluff and counter-bluff; and both men grand masters. What happened when two consummate cross-examiners went to work on each other?

"So, shall we go somewhere and get it all written down?"

"Now, Mr. Kenworthy—the lads have had their little joke. And, for some reason best known to you, you have had yours. May I go to the airport now?"

"I'd like to see the quality of your statement first."

"You'll be pulling the false-confession trick next," Tallow said. "Any minute now someone will bring you a message saying Dolly has made a statement."

Kenworthy smiled at him as if he had been a friend. Gladwin tried to defuse the bomb. "Is this a joke or isn't it, Kenworthy?"

"Nearly every Saturday of my life I come out and play kids' tricks at the wedding receptions of people I've never met in my life before."

"In fact, you're admitting that you've set this up. If you had to use my D-C's, why didn't you do it through me?" Gladwin took comfort from twisting it into an indignant complaint. "Why don't you do things through proper channels?"

"Because of the state the proper channels are in."

"Is that a veiled accusation?"

"If you think that's veiled, Gladwin, you're an optimist."

Before Gladwin could explode, they saw Inspector Garside come in at

the far end of the room, his jaw set purposefully. He beckoned Kenworthy, who got up and went over to him.

"I've just been handed a note in the street by one of our own Detective-Constables, asking me to come here and give you a certain message. The whole thing stinks, Kenworthy, and I'll play no part in it. I've never come across anything in such rotten taste in my life. What the hell are you playing at?"

"A hunch: an idea that some people won't break too easily. All right, Inspector, you've made your point. And you've been seen talking to me. I can take it from there."

"I always respected you. I don't believe my eyes or my ears."

"No need to. You're in the clear, Garside. It will be a relief to the Commissioner that someone in this division is. Just go away now and don't put your foot in things."

"I shall register a formal protest."

"Just get out now, Garside."

Kenworthy walked back across the room to the other two, his face grave, his eyes avoiding theirs. He sat down heavily in the chair he had left and for some seconds held his hand across his forehead.

"All right. It went wrong. And it would be outrageous to try to say I'm sorry. I won't shelter behind the excuse that I thought I was onto something. I don't care now whether I was or I wasn't." He raised his head and looked Tallow in the eyes. "But I am sorry, Benny—"

There was a new wildness in Tallow's eyes: anxiety. "What the hell are you trying to say now?"

"That no one knows how far things will go. Well, I take full responsibility. I tried to operate through a team of juniors, unbeknown to their chief. I used men I don't know. In meager self-defense, I'll say I thought they'd have more sense than to take as much drink as they did before driving along the Ring Road on a Saturday afternoon."

"Stop putting it off, Kenworthy. What the devil has happened?"

"I'm afraid there's been a bad accident—a smash-up—"

Tallow leaped to his feet. "What's happened to Dolly?"

"They've rushed her to the hospital. It may be sometime—"

"Which hospital?"

Kenworthy put a hand on his sleeve. "I'll take you there. Now, don't give up hope. It may not be—"

Tallow rounded on him. "You *bastard!*" He tore into hysterical, verbal

shreds the likes of Kenworthy and the school of police doctrine he stood for. He cursed all hypocrites and *poseurs*. Then he turned his attention to Gladwin.

"And you, you swine! You'd have sat back and let me take the whole bloody rap, wouldn't you? Well, it's finished, Gladwin! I'll tell them one or two other things you've masterminded as well as this Peterson lark. . . ."

"What does a junior do," Tallow asked bitterly in the car, "when he moves into a division that's rotten from the top—when even his first promotion depends on slipping neatly into all the rackets? Make a complaint he can't prove?"

"There's not much you can do about it at this stage," Kenworthy said quietly, negotiating traffic. "And you won't be getting any promises of immunity from me. You've made too many of those yourself in your time."

"There's no hospital down here, Kenworthy."

"I know. The final indignity. I'm taking you back to your home station, which is where Mrs. Tallow is being detained. I'm about to confront her with a man called Marsden—to whom she delivered a tablet of soap with the imprint of a key the day after a previous babysitting engagement. There was no accident. She's alive and well, you'll be glad to know—and, no doubt, will kick vigorously at first."



The intruder's first act was to slash the phone cord . . .

THE MAUNDERING SYNDROME



by
**DANA
LYON**

Dear Becky,

You probably won't believe this letter, but you know I never lie to you except when there's no other way out. After all, we've been friends for fifty years—my goodness, longer than that! We went to school together and I'll be eighty on my next birthday, so it's more like sixty years. Remind me to send you a picture of me when I next write so you can see how well I carry my years. However, just between the two of us, I do

have that maundering syndrome that attacks all of us when we reach a certain age—I note that you too get off the subject a lot when you write to me but, after all, you're six months older than I am, so it's got to be expected.

Where was I? Oh, it's about what happened to me the other night—morning, really, 3:00 A.M. It scared me to death and still does, but I don't know what good it would do to tell the police. They'd just ask if I had any hard evidence and what I would like them to do about it. "I'd like you to protect my life, if you don't mind," I'd say. "That man is apt to come back and murder me, and of course I can't tell you where he lives or his license number—as far as I know he didn't even have a car—or, in fact, what his name is aside from Freddie, a ridiculous name for a hardened criminal."

To get to the point, I was up as usual at 3:00 A.M. I'd set Jill's alarm clock for it. Incidentally, she's off on another trip. She *says* it's business but my darling daughter sure has a lot of trips on her agenda—you don't suppose, do you—? No, she's a nice, respectable divorced woman in her middle years. But, even so, it seems to me she's away a lot, and she always comes home looking absolutely radiant. In our day, if you'll remember, we stopped having affairs after the age of thirty. Well, anyway, she was gone for four days last week—during which time it all happened—and if she'd kept her mouth shut the day she got home I wouldn't be in this fix.

So, as I say, I was up at three o'clock in the morning as usual, feeding the little ones their formula in baby bottles, then cleaning them up afterward now that their mother's in the hospital—oh, dear, I guess I didn't tell you about that. It seems that a couple of months ago when I was off visiting some friends, darling Jill took our beloved Brittany spaniel, Tina, to a place out in the country to have her bred—much to my dismay, because we already had our little cocker, Marigold, and two dogs are enough. Would you believe that when Tina was due, sixty-two days later, Jill was off on one of her trips again and Tina started having her pups all over the house with me trying to catch up with her and get her in her nice comfortable whelping box in the kitchen, which she'd have no part of?

And would you believe there were *ten* pups scattered hither and yon from the garage all through the house to the patio? And me not knowing a thing about what to do for them and cursing Jill meanwhile. Darling

Jill, she really is so good to me, but why the hell isn't she around when I need her?

Anyway, the next day Tina got terribly sick with an infection because the vet didn't give her a shot afterward, which he should have done, and she had to stay in the hospital for a week. The pups had to be fed every three hours, which is why I was up at 3:00 A.M. So there I was in the kitchen. I had just fed Fluffy and picked up another pup when I heard a sound. It was a sound that shouldn't have been there. 3:00 A.M. in the suburbs is eerily silent. I froze, because I knew it wasn't Jill—not at that hour—and it wasn't the house creaking; it was definitely a footstep. From the direction of the patio. And then another footstep, closer.

I glanced up, scared out of my wits, and a man was standing in the doorway. My dear, I was simply frozen. Paralyzed. My heart gave a tremendous leap in my breast and I wondered if this was the end of the trail for me. But, as you know, I have always been quick-witted, so I said calmly, with as much brightness as I could muster, "Oh, you must be the friend Alan's expecting!" Whoever Alan might be. And at three o'clock in the morning.

The man looked startled. "Who's Alan?" he said.

"I guess you're not," I managed to say, my quick wits now departing. "So who are you? The Eastside Strangler I've been hearing so much about? There, there, Caesar," I said to the pup in my hands, "quit squirming. I'll be through with you in a minute."

"Are you kidding?" he said with a shudder. "Me a strangler?"

He was tall and muscular, with a crop of black curls, intent blue eyes, and a mouth that was grim and hard. I deduced that he was engaged in his first crime and didn't want to make a mess of it.

On the other hand, he *could* be a cold-blooded murderer, and I was alone in the house with him, so I dropped Caesar and reached for the phone behind me—even the police were better than nothing.

There was a sudden flash in his hand, a long, thin knife gleamed in the light, and in an instant he slashed the telephone cord.

"What do you want?" I quavered, literally at my wits' end.

"Whatever you've got," he said grimly. "Where do you keep your dough?"

"In the bank, of course," I snapped. I deposited Caesar in the box for fed pups and picked up another from the other one. "Come, Angela," I said, cooing. "Time for chow."

The man came toward me with his deadly knife at my throat. "Stop that!" he snarled. "And tell me where your money is!"

"In my purse, you damned fool!" I yelled at him, scared to death but mad too. "Where else?"

He picked up my handbag from the buffet behind me and went through it. "Thirty-five dollars!" he said in disgust. "Where's the rest?"

"That's it," I said. "Where else do you think I'd keep it—in the sugar bowl?"

"Yeah," he said. "I'm always reading about old folks who keep their dough stashed around the house because they don't trust banks."

"Well, I can tell you one thing," I said tartly. "I trust banks more than I do dangerous criminals like you who break into innocent people's houses in the middle of the night—"

"I didn't break in," he said. "Your patio door was unlocked."

Oh, no, I thought. *Jill will kill me*. She's always after me to lock the door with our special locks against just such an occasion as this, and I'm always forgetting.

"I suppose," I said, "you walked up and down the block till you found an unlocked door?"

"Yeah," he said. "That's the way I get my cars too. You got anything to drink?"

"Just some Amontillado." I put the pup down. "Well, just one more dratted pup. Your turn, Freddie."

"Hey, that's my name!" said the incredible creature, apparently pleased to have a namesake. "What the hell is Amontillado?"

"It's a very excellent Spanish sherry, and it's all I keep around. I really prefer vodka but Jill's afraid I'll become an alcoholic if we have it in the house—though at my age I don't know what difference it would make. Jill's my daughter, and very sweet too."

"Shut up and tell me where this sherry is."

"In the cupboard behind you. While you're at it, you might as well pour me a glass."

So we sat and drank for a while, eyeing each other carefully. I couldn't help wondering if he was contemplating cutting my throat and wondering when the mythical friend of the mythical Alan would turn up or figuring how to get out without my screeching my head off while he was trying to escape.

"Good stuff," he said. Then he surprised me. He glanced at the pups,

now blissfully asleep, and said, "Cute little bastards, aren't they?"

"Young man," I said, "I'm tired. I'd like you to leave."

—He was on his third drink by now. "Not till I finish what I came for," he said. "What else you got besides that thirty-five bucks?"

"The clothes on my back, that's all."

"You must be nuts," he said. "This swell house, all that satin-covered furniture, carpets you sink into, a swimming pool I nearly fell into—what right do *you* have to all them things when people's starving all over the world?" I noticed that as he got worked up his grammar deteriorated. "You and your likes never worked a day in your life, you just sit around spending all the money you never had to work for. Me, I can't even get a job. The only way I can eat is to get a handout from the government—"

"You mean my taxes go to feed a strong, able-bodied man like you?"

"There, you-see? You pay taxes, so you gotta have some dough. Right? Never worked a day in your life," he repeated bitterly. "Look at that fancy wrapper you got on—all silk I bet. Look at this fancy house and everything in it—and me, I got raised on the streets and I'm still on the streets. By God, I'm going to take what's coming to me."

"What makes you think I never worked a day in my life?" I demanded. "You think I inherited my money? Well, you're wrong." I thought fast and decided I could go him one better. "You think *you* had it hard!" I said, raising my voice in fury. "You don't know what poverty is, with your food stamps and welfare and free medical aid and anything else the damned government can think of to raise taxes. Well, let me tell *you* a thing or two!"

He started to say something but I brushed it aside and went on with my tirade. "My life was *hell*. I grew up in the slums of New York—Hell's Kitchen. My playground was the street. My father was a drunken brute and my mother died from childbearing—eight kids in nine years—and when I was five I was put in an orphanage where I was undernourished and got beaten at least once a week. You think *you've* suffered? Well, I'll tell you about suffering."

I brought a horrible stepmother into the picture, then a really frightful first marriage, my determination to make something of myself, an eviction from a wretched furnished room, a job as a dishwasher at thirty dollars a week, scrubbing floors and trying to keep my little girl from starving, gradually working my way up to success.

"You!" I yelled at the young man. "You sit there and accuse me of being a bloated capitalist and you want to take all my money away from me. Why? Because you think I had it so easy compared with you. If anyone ever had a right to break into other people's houses and steal their trash it's me. But, even though I worked myself almost to death and sometimes had to stoop pretty low, I never went around robbing people at the point of a knife and insulting them into the bargain. I worked. Have you? All that bunk about how you can't get a job! Well, if you're so damned anxious to get work, you can come out here tomorrow and cut my lawn! My gardener quit three weeks ago and I haven't been able to get anyone since. I'll pay you three dollars an hour."

"That ain't much," he said. "Hardly more than minimum."

"So you'd rather steal?" I said. "Three-fifty."

"O.K.," he said, rising—*finally, thank God*. "I wouldn't do it for no one else, and I'm only doing it for you because you've had such a bum life." He wobbled a bit and grabbed hold of the back of his chair. "We got the same background, and I see what you mean about working and saving. Anybody but someone like you, suffering so much to get ahead, I'd have cut their throat if they held out on me. That mean stepfather of yours, did he ever—you know?—molest you?"

"No," I said, shuddering (and wasn't it my stepmother?). "But he tried! That's why I ran away from home." (What happened to the orphanage?)

"You poor kid," he said. "O.K. if I got out by the front door?"

"Sure," I said. "Lock it behind you."

He started out, then paused in the doorway. For a moment I thought he was going to change his mind about leaving. "O.K.," he said. "You've had a bum deal just like me, and I'll cut your damned lawn tomorrow, but if I ever find out you've been lying to me about all that hard luck of yours, I'll be back—with my knife." His mouth turned hard and grim again. "You can count on it."

He was gone. I went to the front door to check it and, sure enough, he hadn't locked it. Then I went back to the kitchen and had a quiet attack of hysteria.

The next afternoon Jill came bounding in, looking radiant and rested. Amazing how a little business trip can transform a person. She kissed me and said, "Hey, Ma, where'd you get that kook out there cutting the lawn?"

"What do you mean, kook?" I said. "I took the pups to the vet to have their tails cropped, and he said they were the healthiest litter he'd ever seen for one that size."

"I got to talking to him," said Jill, throwing her jacket on a chair where it slid off onto the floor, "and he told me you hired him at two dollars an hour. I told him you always *were* kind of stingy and gave him an extra ten. He said it was because you had such a hard life, being so poverty-stricken and hard-working all those years. I just hooted and told him he can't have known you very long, that you had governesses and pony carts and went to private schools. I told him your father was a part owner in the Comstock lode in Nevada and the richest man in town, a bank president. 'Where'd you get the idea she had a hard struggle?' I asked him. 'She hardly knows which end of a vacuum cleaner is up.' He just looked at me, turned off the lawn mower, and said, 'Tell her I'll be back. She'll know what I mean.' And he took off. What on earth's going on around here?"

Becky, you don't suppose he's really coming back, do you? Just because of a few little white lies?

Love,
Cleo

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Mirlo had been an assassin for hire . . .

FICTION

by
**EDWARD
D. HOCH**



It was like a great many other English university towns, with students on bicycles competing fiercely for the bit of pavement the narrow streets provided. Unaccustomed to driving on the left, even after two months in the country, George Proctor was no match for them in these unfamiliar streets. He sighed with relief when at last he turned into the paved parking lot next to the squat four-story building that was his destination.

Somehow Proctor had expected a company with a name as imposing

as Universal Computerized Biographies, Limited to occupy the entire building, or at least a large portion of it. What he found instead was a row of connected offices tucked away at the rear of the top floor, presided over by a half dozen young women and a balding cherub named Leon Bronze.

He rose from behind a massive oak desk strewn with computer print-outs as Proctor was shown in by one of the young women. "Ah; so good of you to come, Mr. Proctor. Please sit down."

"I don't really know if I'm the man you want," Proctor confessed.

"Why? Because you're an American?" Leon Bronze chuckled. "I never hold that against a man, if he's a good enough writer."

"The agent in London merely said you were looking for a collaborator. I'm between books at the moment and it sounded like something that might interest me."

Leon Bronze allowed a sly grin to play about the corners of his mouth. "What have you published, Mr. Proctor?"

"Two novels and a few short stories, back in the States."

"Nothing over here?"

"I've only been in England for two months."

"I see. May I ask why you decided to move here?"

Proctor shifted uneasily in his chair, reminded of the first job interview he'd ever had. "It's a long story. I'm divorced and my ex-wife is suing me for back alimony. I was afraid if I stayed in New York she could drain me of every penny I earned, or even have me arrested and put in a civil jail."

Leon Bronze seemed surprised. "They do that in America?"

"Sometimes. I know a fellow who spent several months in jail for non-payment of alimony."

"How do they expect you to earn the money if you're in jail?" the Englishman asked mildly.

"That's what my lawyer tried to tell them. Anyway, I'm hoping to earn enough money over here to live on until I can go back home and settle things."

"Are you a good writer, Mr. Proctor?"

George felt himself flushing a bit. "I think so. My first novel earned some respectable reviews."

"How old are you?"

"I'm thirty-seven, but I don't see what that has to—"

"I don't mean to pry into your personal life, Mr. Proctor, but these questions are important. I need to know a bit about you before I take you fully into my confidence."

"I was led to believe that you were looking for a collaborator on a novel."

"And so I am. A novel based on fact. I believe it can be a best seller. Novels of intrigue are very big these days."

"Is that what you have in mind? A spy story?"

"Not exactly a spy story." Leon Bronze relaxed and folded his hands before him. But before he could continue, the door opened and one of the young women entered, carrying a folded computer printout.

"Here's the data you requested, Mr. Bronze," she said, placing it on his cluttered desk.

"Thank you, Millie. Please see that I'm not disturbed for the next half hour, will you? Hold all calls."

Proctor wondered if that was for his benefit. He'd been in the office fifteen minutes and hadn't heard the phone ring once. "Just what is the business of Universal Computerized Biographies?" he asked.

Leon Bronze thumbed through the printout Millie had brought him and returned it to the desk. He folded his hands again, like a schoolmaster about to deliver a lesson. "We issue volumes of computer-generated biographical material on leading figures in all fields of human endeavor. These are the printouts on American authors, but I don't find you listed among them."

"I'm not surprised. My career has been a bit too brief for me to be in any reference books yet. But how is your service any better than the usual biographical dictionary?"

"Ours is a nomad society, Mr. Proctor—especially in your country. People reach high positions in business or government by constantly changing jobs, advancing themselves by a variety of moves within their chosen fields. An author or journalist might work for several publishers, an educator lecture at a number of different universities, a career diplomat or foreign correspondent turn up in a dozen world capitals, an advertising man be employed by several agencies during the course of their careers. Our computers store this information, supplying on demand a profile of the subject as detailed as his own résumé."

"Interesting, but is there much demand for it?"

"Oh, you'd be surprised! UCB has now published twenty-four volumes

of biographies, with three more due later this year. Each contains close to three thousand entries. We sell mainly to libraries, of course, and to the subjects themselves."

Proctor let his gaze wander to the bookcase behind Bronze's head. He imagined that the fat red volumes could easily bring forty or fifty dollars each from those vain enough to want to see their names in print. It was a racket of sorts, and he wondered if the Englishman's request for a collaborator would prove to be another kind of racket.

"How does this involve me?" he asked, anxious to get to the point.

"I'll be frank, Mr. Proctor. Quite by accident I stumbled upon something of great interest. Have you ever heard of a man called Mirlo?"

"Mirlo? I don't believe so."

"I'm not surprised, though he was mentioned in the press a few times back in the late Sixties. *Mirlo* is the Spanish word for blackbird. It was a pseudonym used by a particularly successful assassin whose skill was available to the highest bidder. From 1965 to 1969 he operated throughout the Middle East and the Mediterranean region, then he simply dropped from sight and ceased operations. The rumors had him dead, but I never believed it for a minute."

"You seem to have taken a personal interest in him."

"Yes," Bronze answered, looking away. "Mirlo kept his true identity a closely guarded secret, and it was said only his victims ever got to see his face. If indeed they did. I kept a careful record of his movements through various countries, with the dates of his activities as well as they are known. It occurred to me some time back that Mirlo might have ceased operations because he had become too well known—not in his assassin's role but in his other, real identity."

"You mean Mirlo was a famous person?"

"Not when he started. But he became one. At least that was my suspicion. And of all the people on earth I was in the best possible position to verify this. My company has collected computerized biographies of nearly one hundred thousand individuals of all nationalities. I simply fed the computer my list of dates and places and waited for it to match up with a biography already on file."

"And were you successful?"

"Not immediately. There were a few discrepancies, of course. In these days of jet travel a person is not always where he says he is. I adjusted the computer to deliver the biographical lists which most closely matched

the Mirlo itinerary. And that was when I made my discovery."

He opened a desk drawer, took out two sheets of paper torn from a perforated computer roll, and handed them to Proctor.

Proctor ran his eyes down the first sheet, headed: MIRLO—CONFIRMED MOVEMENTS, 1965–1969. There were dates and places—just a few for each year—Athens, Venice, Istanbul, Rome, Jerusalem, Cairo, Madrid, Teheran, Algiers. He turned to the second sheet.

"What's this? Foster Hay?"

"His name is familiar to you," Bronze said with satisfaction.

"It's familiar to anyone who watches television back in the States. He does a weekly series of news specials from major cities around the world, mainly in Europe. Are you trying to tell me that Foster Hay—?"

"Read the printout."

Proctor read it. Athens, Venice, Istanbul. No Rome, no Teheran. But Jerusalem was there, and Cairo, and Madrid. Algiers was there, but with slightly different dates. "A coincidence," he said. "After all, the man is a foreign correspondent."

"What better cover for a hired assassin?"

Proctor shook his head. "I can't accept it. He probably earns a hundred thousand a week for his TV program. I'm sure that's far more than the best professional assassins are paid."

"I agree. But what about fifteen years ago? No one had ever heard of Foster Hay then. Look at his printout. In 1965 he was a stringer for an American radio service, filing dispatches from various foreign cities. Chances are he was paid by the story rather than being on salary. But in 1969 he joined the news team of an American television network and around that same time the assassin Mirlo dropped from sight. His face was becoming too well known, and he no longer needed the money."

"And you're telling me you want to write a book about this?"

"I want *you* to write a book about it. As fiction, of course. Our libel laws here are quite strict."

"If I fictionalize it enough to disguise his identity, we'd probably lose the point of the book."

"Give it some thought. I'm sure you can work it out. I'll supply you with everything I have, including a complete file of newspaper accounts of Mirlo's assassinations. I even have a publisher in mind. The money could be split fifty-fifty—or perhaps a bit better than that, in your favor, if you agree."

"I'll have to sleep on it. This wasn't exactly what I had in mind when I drove up here."

"Could we meet again later this week, after you've given it some thought?"

"I suppose so."

"I must insist that our little talk remain confidential, of course."

"Of course."

"Will you be driving back to London now?"

"I think so. I have just time to get back before the evening rush hour."

Leon Bronze rose and shook his hand. "I hope this will be the beginning of a long and profitable relationship."

Proctor went downstairs and got into his car. All the way back to London he thought about the strange little man and his computer print-outs. And he thought about Foster Hay, who'd parlayed half a lifetime abroad as a foreign correspondent into the improbable role of a TV superstar.

A book about a television newsman who was really a retired assassin? Well, why not? People wrote books these days claiming deceased film stars had been Nazi spies.

But dead men couldn't sue and live ones could...

Dead men couldn't be blackmailed, either.

Back in London he parked in the ramp garage adjoining one of the luxury hotels along Park Lane. He took the elevator to a suite of rooms on the top floor and pushed the buzzer by the door.

It was opened by a slim blonde woman who smiled and said, "You made good time."

"It was a brief meeting." He followed her into the room and sat down.

A man by the window turned toward him and asked, "Well?"

"You were right," Proctor said. "He wants me to do a book about it."

Foster Hay's face relaxed into the familiar TV image. "Now at least we know where we stand."

Gloria Hay poured them each a drink and sat down on the sofa next to Proctor. He'd come out of the bathroom to find her alone and she'd explained, "Foster went downstairs to check on the transportation arrangements for tomorrow."

"He's upset about this fellow Bronze, isn't he?"

"Wouldn't you be?" She leaned over for a match to light her cigarette

and he was struck again by the sensuality of her movements. "He's on the verge of signing a new five-year contract with the network and this kook shows up with a crazy story about him being an assassin."

"Did he actually try to blackmail Foster?"

"He did the next best thing. He phoned him three weeks ago, identifying himself, and made these ridiculous charges. Foster simply hung up on him. He had the impression the man wanted money. The next thing we heard was that Leon Bronze had contacted some London literary agents about finding a collaborator for a book. That's when Foster asked you to drive up there."

Proctor sipped his drink. It was Scotch with a tiny bit of water. Gloria assumed everyone drank what she drank. "How long have you known Foster?" he asked.

"Well, we've been married eight years. I knew him two or three years before that."

"But not during the years Bronze is talking about—1965 to 1969?"

"I think I met him in '69 in Madrid." She looked distastefully at her cigarette and stubbed it out. "Hell, George, what difference does any of this make now? This man Bronze is dredging up ancient history. Foster's a different person now."

He stared at her. "You're not telling me you believe any of this Mirlo business?"

"Of course not! I'm just saying it was a long time ago and—"

The door of the suite opened and Foster Hay entered carrying a handful of mail. The staff of his *Remarkable World* television series had been based in London for the past two months, taping segments of the show for transmission via satellite to the American network. Before London, Proctor had been with Hay in Paris, doing much of the writing for the show. Hay liked to add a personal touch and ad-lib now and then as they taped the show, but the basic script was Proctor's. During his six months with the show he'd developed a good working relationship with Foster Hay and an easy friendship with Gloria.

"We're all set for the morning," Hay told them, sorting through the mail. "We're cleared for the House of Commons at noon."

"What about Leon Bronze?" Gloria asked him. "Now that George has seen him, what's the next move?"

Foster turned to Proctor. "What do you think? Can you play along with him? Pretend you'll write the book and get hold of the computer printouts

and newspaper clippings he mentioned? Then when we have enough evidence we'll slap him with a million-dollar lawsuit."

Proctor wasn't happy with the assignment. "I hate to take the time away from the show," he said.

"It won't take much time. Perhaps you can do it in one more visit."

Proctor shrugged and decided to go along with it. Foster Hay was, after all, his employer. And the story he'd told Bronze about his ex-wife hounding him for alimony hadn't been entirely fiction. "All right," he agreed. "I'll phone Bronze in the morning and set up another date with him."

On his second visit to Universal Computerized Biographies he found Leon Bronze fired with new energy. The little man hopped around the cluttered office, shoving fat manila folders and scrapbooks full of clippings at Proctor. "Take this and read it thoroughly. And these printouts. Compare the dates! You'll see there can be no mistake about it! Foster Hay is Mirlo!"

Proctor tried to calm him down. "Remember, I've agreed to write a *novel* based on this information—a work of fiction. You don't need to convince me of anything. It doesn't matter whether your theory is correct or not."

"It's no theory, Mr. Proctor."

"You haven't approached Foster Hay with this, have you?" George asked, trying to keep the question casual.

Leon Bronze's expression immediately darkened, like a sly fox encountering an unexpected hound. "Why should I do that?"

"I don't know. I just don't want to get involved in any kind of a lawsuit."

"Don't worry about it," Bronze said, busily sorting more papers and piling them onto Proctor's briefcase.

"If you don't mind my saying so, Mr. Bronze, this thing seems to have become an obsession with you."

The Englishman paused and turned cold eyes on Proctor. "And why shouldn't it be? There's one bit of information I haven't given you until now, Mr. Proctor. A most important bit of information. Mirlo's final victim was my son."

Proctor went back to London, to his room on the top floor of the hotel on Park Lane, and studied the raft of documents Leon Bronze had pro-

vided. He pored over the names of the victims, together with the dates and manners of their death. In most cases the murder weapon had been a .22-caliber target pistol fired at fairly close range. Proctor knew the weapon had become a favorite with the underworld in America during the past decade. It was small and accurate and could be effectively fitted with a silencer, but even without a silencer it was quieter than most handguns. Shots to the brain were the most effective, since the weapon had no stopping power if aimed at the torso, but this was no problem for an expert marksman at close range.

The victims were a broad cross-section: a businessman in Athens, an underworld figure in Venice, a known smuggler in Istanbul, an Israeli secret agent in Cairo. Obviously Mirlo worked for the highest bidder, regardless of politics. They were all, Proctor admitted, people with whom Foster Hay might have come in contact during the preparation of a radio or TV newscast.

In the later articles some accounts speculated that the mysterious international assassin called Mirlo might be involved. Though the bullets did not always match, the caliber of gun was generally the same, leading to speculation that the assassin had several pistols, or at least several interchangeable gun barrels.

The last clipping in the file did not mention Mirlo. Apparently no one but Leon Brönze had made the connection. It told of the murder of a twenty-eight-year-old man named Michael Bronsity in an alley in Algiers. The article hinted that drugs were involved. Bronsity had been stabbed, not shot, but a .22-caliber target pistol had been found about ten feet from the body. Apparently it had jammed or misfired and had been discarded for the knife the killer used. Bronsity was described as an unemployed writer, and Proctor felt an immediate kinship with him. Still, why would Mirlo take the trouble to kill an unemployed writer in an Algiers alley? Proctor had generally found writers to be a harmless lot, given to no vice worse than heavy drinking.

He was still pondering over it when there was a gentle knock on the connecting door to the Hays' suite. He opened it and Gloria stood there, holding two martinis.

"I heard you moving around and thought you might like a drink. It's cocktail time and Foster is away. I hate drinking alone."

"Where is he?" Proctor asked, standing aside and closing the door after her.

"Still shooting at the House of Commons. It ran longer than he expected." She eyed the pile of clippings and printouts. "How was your meeting with Bronze?"

"I'm beginning to think he might be crazy—or at the very least obsessed. He's convinced Foster was Mirlo."

She handed him the drink and sat down, carefully crossing her legs. A bare knee was visible through the slit in her lounging robe. "Have you considered the possibility that he might be right?"

"You hinted at that before. That business of it not mattering what happened so many years ago."

"Oh, it does matter, I suppose. But what would you do if you found out it was true? Would you write the book?"

"A work of fiction would hardly seem the proper way to deal with it if I thought it was true."

"Would blackmail be a better way?"

"That's what Bronze tried, wasn't it?"

"Foster didn't really say. But he was quite disturbed by the phone call, especially with this new contract in the works." She sipped her drink. "If something happened and the program wasn't renewed, what would you do?"

"I never speculate on things like that."

"I'm worried about this business, George. I'm worried about Foster's future—and your future too."

"Cheer up. If Foster wasn't Mirlo, he's got nothing to worry about. If he was, then we've got nothing to worry about. He'll probably settle our futures by killing us along with Bronze."

"How can you joke about it?"

The martini was making Proctor light-headed. He stared at Gloria Hay's uncovered knee and wondered what she really wanted. She was much younger than Hay, about Proctor's own age. Had she suddenly decided Hay was guilty? Had she decided Hay was a sinking ship and Proctor might be a passing rescue vessel?

"Bronze says his son was Mirlo's last victim," George told her.

"What?"

"An unemployed writer named Bronsity."

Something flickered in her eyes. "Bronsity. That name is familiar. When I first met Foster I think he had a writer working for him named Bronsity. I never connected it with Bronze."

"What happened to him?"

She shrugged. "He left before I really got to know Foster. I think I only met him once."

"Where?"

She thought. "It must have been Madrid."

"Not Algiers?"

She shook her head. "I've never been to Algiers."

They heard the door open in her suite and she immediately stood up. "Gloria?" Foster Hay called.

"In here, Foster."

He walked through the connecting door and sat down on the bed. "I'm exhausted. They ran us around in circles today." He picked up Gloria's glass and drained the last of her martini. "Go mix me one, will you, dear?" He looked tiredly at Proctor. "You saw Bronze. Did he name his price?"

"He says Mirlo killed his son."

Foster Hay looked startled. "What's that?"

"His son was Michael Bronsity."

"God! I remember him! He did some writing for me when I still had the radio show. He traveled around with us some. You never knew him, did you, Gloria?"

She called back through the doorway to their suite. "I met him once, in Madrid."

"He left right after Madrid. He was involved in narcotics somehow."

"You didn't know he'd been murdered?"

"No. Where did it happen?"

"In Algiers, in 1969. According to Bronze, he was Mirlo's last victim."

"He thinks I killed his son?"

"That's what he says."

He thought about it. "I see. If I was Mirlo, his son might have discovered it and I had to kill him."

Proctor handed over the clipping. "Stabbed him in an alley in Algiers after your gun jammed. But it was too close for comfort and it scared you off ever killing again. That, and the fact that the new television series was making your face too well known."

Hay read the news account from the Algiers English-language paper. "But I can prove I didn't commit this murder. On October first, 1969, I was in New York signing the contract for my television series. It's not

a date I'm likely to forget. Even with the time difference I couldn't have been in Algiers that same night. I was in New York at almost the exact hour of the killing. The signed contract and the witnesses would prove it!"

"Then you can sue him," Proctor suggested.

Foster Hay finished his drink. "He hasn't put anything in writing yet. We'll talk about it in the morning. Come on, Gloria."

As she left the room Gloria turned an uncertain face in Proctor's direction. It seemed to be some sort of warning, but he couldn't be sure who or what she was warning him against.

He was dreaming that the book was written and had become a best seller. Critics debated whether it was fact or fiction, and some even speculated on the identity of the world-famous newscaster. In the dream there was a knocking on his door, but gradually he realized that that part of it wasn't a dream. He groped for his watch on the bedside table and saw that the time was 2:12. The knocking was not from the connecting door but from the hall.

He slipped into a robe and opened the door a crack. Leon Bronze stood there. "I must talk to you," he said.

"It's the middle of the night!"

"Let me in. It's important."

Proctor unlatched the security chain, and only after Bronze had entered the room did it occur to him that if Bronze knew where to find him, he had to know he worked for Foster Hay.

"What is it?" he asked. "What's so urgent?" But as he spoke he saw the small revolver in Bronze's hand.

"Don't move, Mr. Proctor. I mean to use this, on you or Foster Hay, or maybe on both of you."

"But—"

"I followed you this afternoon, and I found out your room was part of a suite used by Foster Hay and his crew. You're one of them—"

"Put that gun away and let's talk sensibly."

"Call his room and get him in here."

"You're crazy!"

Bronze raised the revolver until Proctor was looking down the barrel. "Obsessed, but not crazy, Mr. Proctor. Foster Hay is Mirlo, the assassin, and I plan to bring him to justice one way or another. I accused him of

it and he sent you to steal my proof. Now I can only take direct action."

"Your so-called proof is over there on the desk. Take it and get out."

"You're not so easily rid of me, Mr. Proctor. I was willing to have the book published as fiction, but it will serve better as a trial transcript."

Proctor kept his eyes on the gun, trying to calculate the moment when he could make a grab for it. "You knew your son was working for Foster Hay before his death. This whole business of running it through the computer was a sham. You had your villain before you even started, didn't you? Ten years of it seething inside you was more that you could bear. The computer only proved what you wanted it to prove all along."

"Does that make him less guilty?" Bronze asked.

Before Proctor could reply he heard the connecting door behind him open. He turned, to warn Hay, and saw that it was not Hay but Glòria, her mouth open in surprise. She stared at the gun and started to turn when suddenly Foster appeared, pushing her aside. "What's going on here?" he demanded. "What are you doing?"

Leon Bronze pointed the gun straight at him and fired three shots.

Then Proctor was on him, wrestling him to the floor, while Gloria screamed in terror from the doorway. He wrestled the gun from the man's fingers, then turned in time to see Foster Hay sag against the wall and slide to the floor. There was blood on his face and chest.

"You damned fool!" Proctor shouted at the man beneath him. "Don't you know you killed the wrong person? Foster Hay wasn't an assassin! Your own son was Mirlo!"

Gloria was on the telephone, calling for help that would arrive too late. And Leon Bronze squirmed and twisted on the floor, trying to escape Proctor's words.

"No," he insisted. "No! That's not true!"

"Your son did some writing for Hay and traveled with him at times. He was in the same cities, dealing in drugs and killing for hire. The computer would have matched him with Mirlo too if his name and résumé had been in the computer. Mirlo's killings didn't stop because of Foster Hay's TV job. They stopped because Mirlo himself was dead—killed in an alley when his pistol jammed and some nameless victim stabbed him in self-defense."

"No—" Bronze's voice was only a whisper.

"Michael Bronsity was Mirlo, and you must have suspected it all the

time. Ten years of that subconscious fear drove you to try to prove Mirlo was somebody else."

The room was suddenly full of people, but Leon Bronze didn't see them. He seemed to be staring at something far away, beyond the crumpled body of Foster Hay, beyond that alley where his son had died.

Proctor went to Gloria later, after the police had gone. "You came to my room tonight," he said. "And Foster followed you. Why?"

She didn't answer his question. Perhaps she didn't have to. Instead she said, "I was as bad as Bronze. I thought Foster was a killer too."

"Maybe we'll never know the whole truth. Whatever he was, Foster's luck ran out tonight."

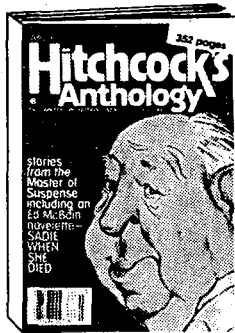
She went to the window and stared out at the city that was awakening in the first light of dawn. "Will you write about this, George? About what happened here tonight?"

"If I ever do," he told her, "I'll write it as fiction."

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CRIME ON SCREEN

by Peter Christian

“We’re dealing with a person with emotional dysfunction and problems of maladjustment,” the gruff cop snorts in Brian De Palma’s new thriller, *Dressed To Kill*, but this police-report description is—quite unlike the film itself—extremely understated. For the killer who lurks in the New York shadows is more bizarre than any you’re likely to view on the contemporary screen, in a movie which more than lives up to what we have come to expect from De Palma: spine-tingling, terrifying, outrageous melodrama done with cinematic skill and a highly personal enthusiasm, a zest that carries unsuspecting audiences right over the rim of a roller-coaster swiftly down into the terror-tunnel beneath.

The De Palma method is hard to define, for much of it is in the infectious high spirits with which he tackles the most somber of topics, and the visual sureness with which he structures the telling—there is not a wasted camera set-up, and his frames are busy with side information for the alert viewer. His camerawork and narrative style is quite deliberately Hitchcockian, the director he resembles more than any other. Indeed, many of his films are actual homages to Hitchcock. And, like the master, and *unlike* most of the other Hollywood toilers, De Palma has a hand in every creative stage of his work. He most often writes his own scripts, sometimes basing them on his own original stories. He is currently being touted as a “master of the macabre,” an appellation sometimes too freely given to undistinguished horror hackmen—but for De Palma it is deserved.

De Palma, still young (he is in his thirties), grew up in Philadelphia in a scientific environment: his father was an orthopedic surgeon, and at times he watched him operate. ("When I was a child I was thrust up against the reality of physical pain and terror. . .") In high school he spent his spare time designing computers, aiming for a career in physics. But while taking graduate work in theater arts at Sarah Lawrence College he became interested in filmmaking and shot an award-winning short. Ultimately, he directed some low-budget features outside the genre—including the Robert DeNiro youth satire, *Greetings*, and an Orson Welles comedy about stage magicians, *Get To Know Your Rabbit* (sound advice!).

Then, in 1973, he both wrote and directed his first mystery, a haunting thriller called *Sisters*. The film deliberately evoked a Hitchcock mood; though the story was completely original, it was told in a close Hitchcockian style, with even Bernard Herrmann doing the music. The start is quite ordinary: a television quiz show in which a young woman (Margot Kidder) finds herself attracted to a fellow contestant. The following morning the young man is savagely murdered, and this killing is witnessed by another young woman, an energetic reporter (Jennifer Salt) for a Staten Island weekly looking for the Big Story. She learns that Kidder is one of Siamese twins separated not too many years ago in a landmark surgical procedure, and that the sister had disappeared. Hovering in the background as well is the surgeon who had made the separation, dangerously unhinged and in love with his patient. At each turn of the plot events turn more nightmarish, but the film is hypnotic and compelling.

Sisters is now something of a classic, and audiences still find themselves stunned by the unexpected death of the young man close to the beginning of the film. For partings are not easy in De Palma films: "The more you become involved with a character," he has said, "the more startling his death becomes. That's true of all suspense thrillers, unless you are dealing with a film like *Alien* where you don't have any particular feelings about the characters." In De Palma stories you *care* about everyone, from victims to heroes—and sometimes those categories are interchangeable.

Phantom of Paradise was his next work, an attempt to update the *Phantom of the Opera* story into a rock-music fantasy setting; it was too busy and somewhat clumsy. The film which followed, *Obsession*, was his most lyrical and controlled, a suspense film of singular beauty. Years before, a rising industrialist (Cliff Robertson) had watched in horror as

his wife and young daughter were killed in an extortion attempt. Now, a decade later; a lonely traveller, he meets a young woman (Genevieve Bujold) painting in an Italian church who is the image of his dead wife—and falls in love with her. We know, though he of course does not, that the girl he is rushing headlong into marriage is actually his now-grown daughter, and that he is about to become for the second time in his life the target of a most sinister plot. The suspense is throat-clutching and the ending stunning.

Obsession deals as much with the power of love as it does with murder, betrayal, and incest, and was for De Palma a critical success. His next film, released the same year (1976), was a boxoffice spectacular. *Carrie*, based on the Stephen King novel, tells of a repressed young girl (the talented Sissy Spacek) who revenges herself upon her cloddish fellow students by unleashing terrible psychic forces during her high school prom. She comes to a bad end—though managing to reach out finally even from beyond the grave—but won the affections of youth audiences everywhere. De Palma followed this with *The Fury*, about a father (Kirk Douglas) and son united by telekinetic powers others wish at all costs to stop.

Now, however, the writer-director has returned fully to the mystery form. It is difficult to speak much of *Dressed To Kill* without giving away the many eye-popping twists and turns of De Palma's plot. The film begins with Angie Dickinson, a suburban housewife bored with her marriage and disturbed by restless dreams. She is being treated by a psychiatrist (Michael Caine), among whose other patients is a troubled transsexual he fears has gone amok. Indeed; Bobbi has stolen a scalpel from his office, left his care, and has begun a series of random, senseless murders in the dark streets of the city, literally dressed to kill.

"There's all kinds of ways to get killed in the city, if you're looking," says a police investigator, but De Palma knows only the most bizarre. And the most cinematic. There are five minutes of silent camera-movement in New York's Metropolitan Museum (though filmed at the Philadelphia Museum of Fine Art, doubling for the Met because it had too many exhibitions to accommodate De Palma) of such visual intensity as to leave one breathless. Minutes later Bobbi will do the same. Brian De Palma, young master of the macabre, has in *Dressed To Kill* dressed up the old phantom-killer thriller and set a new fashion for murder. Long may he weave.

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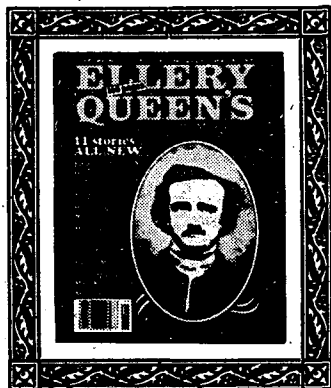
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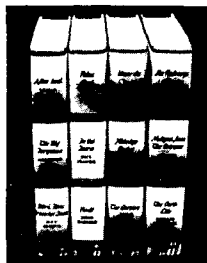
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